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(54) **SELF-PROPELLED POWER UNIT WITH
REMOVABLE ATTACHMENT ASSEMBLY**

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See application file for complete search history.

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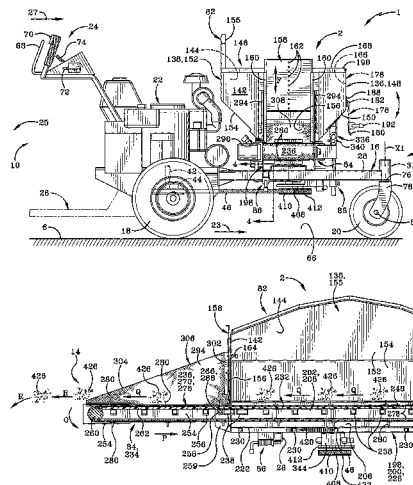
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The invention relates to a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit, an attachment for use with such a unit and associated methods. The unit may be in the form of a mower having a mower deck. The attachment includes a hopper and conveyor assembly for discharging particulate material from the hopper. The conveyor assembly has operational and stored positions, the latter of which provides a narrower profile of the attachment and unit. The attachment and mower deck may be mounted on the frame of the unit together or separately. The attachment is configured for rapid mounting and dismounting on the frame of the unit, and provides additional functionality to a mower or other unit on which the attachment is mounted.

17 Claims, 22 Drawing Sheets



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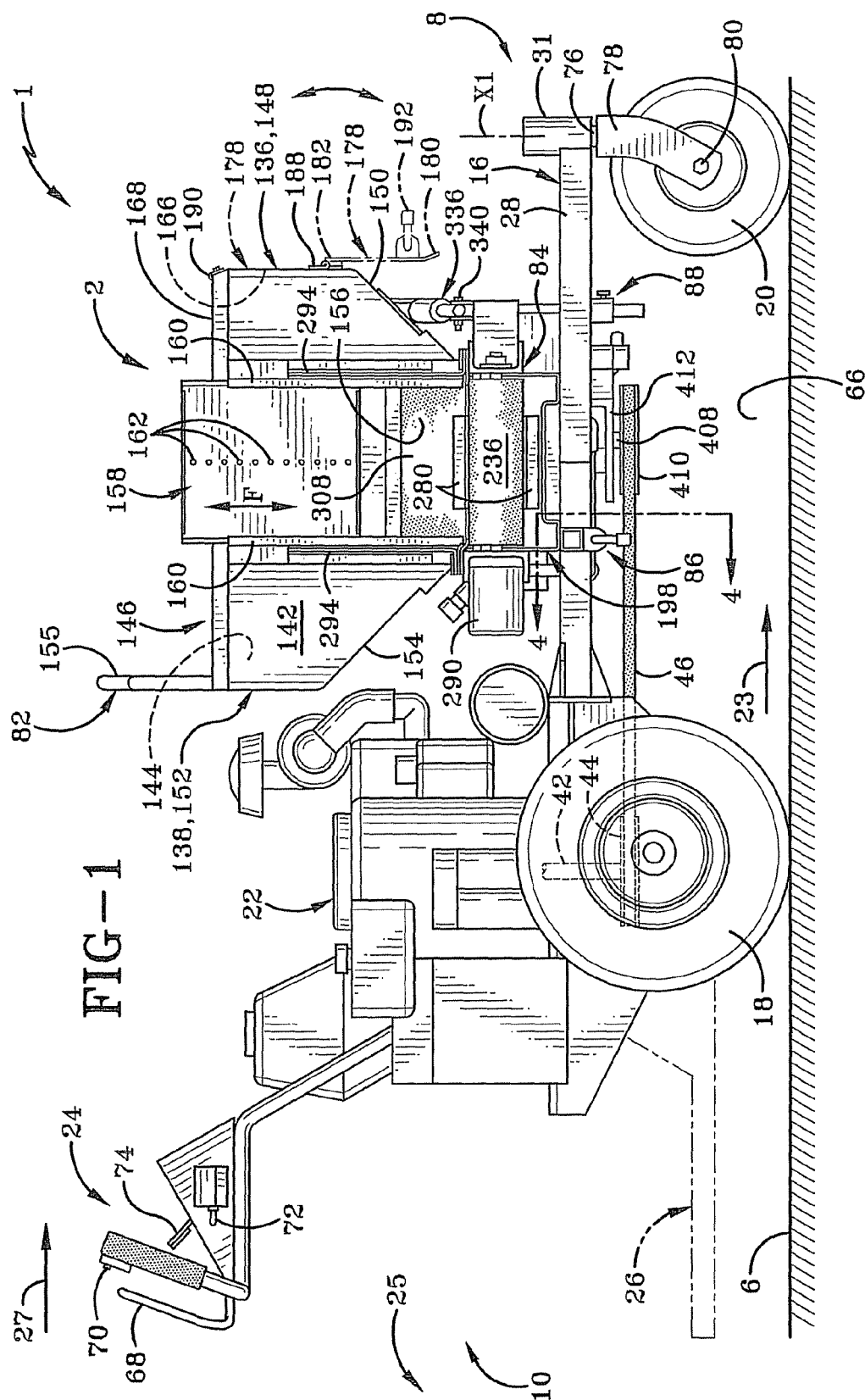
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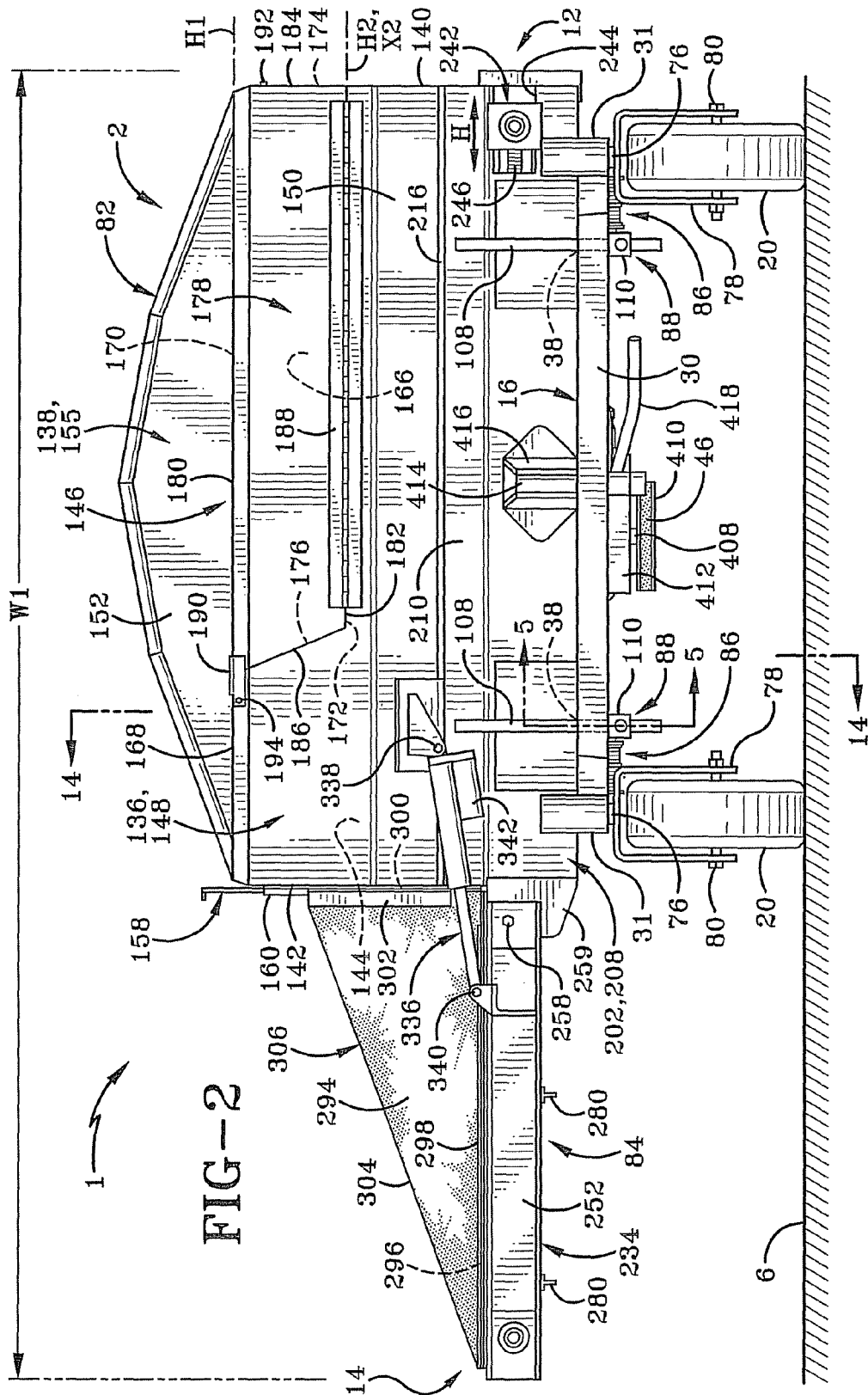
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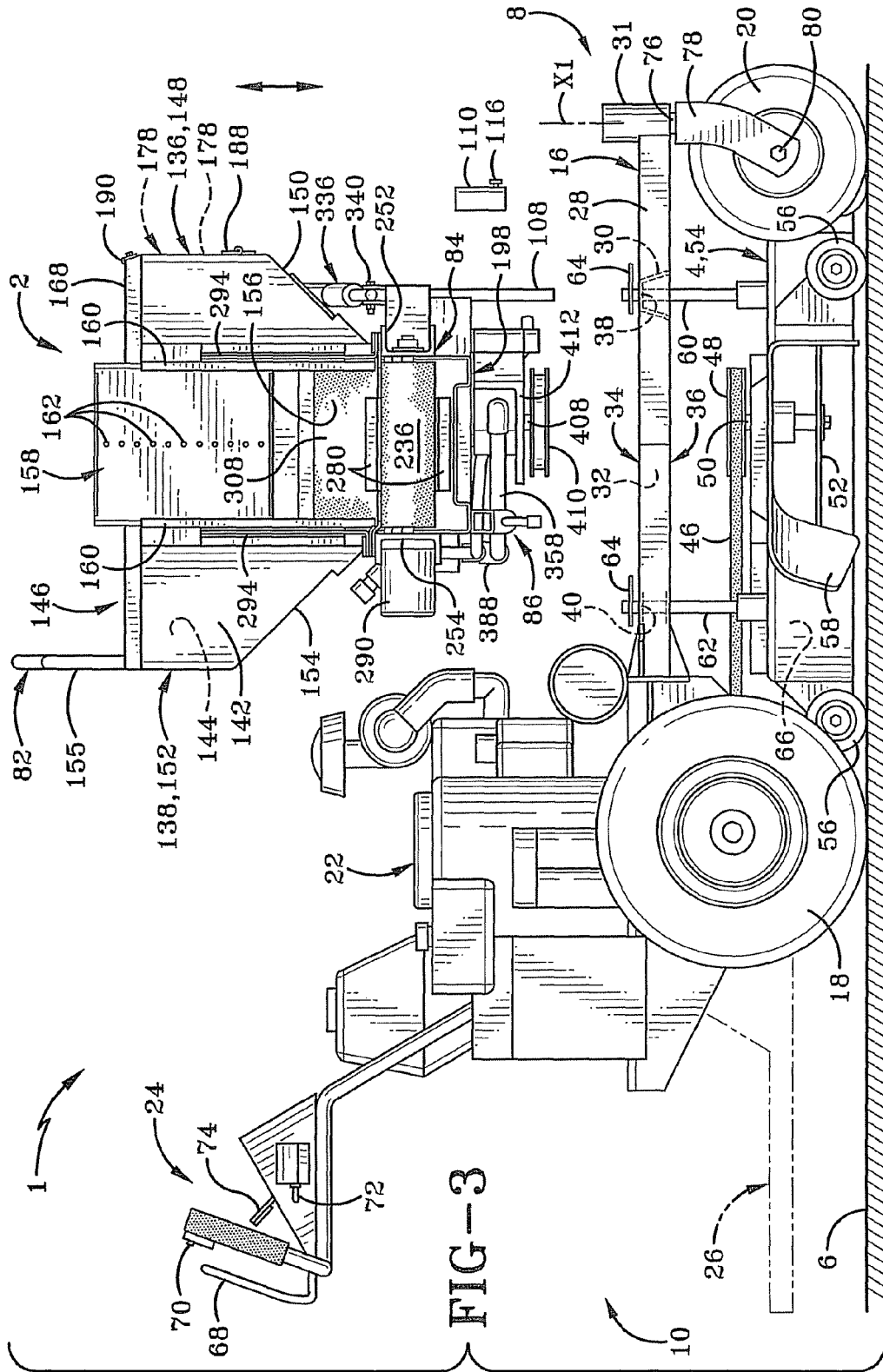
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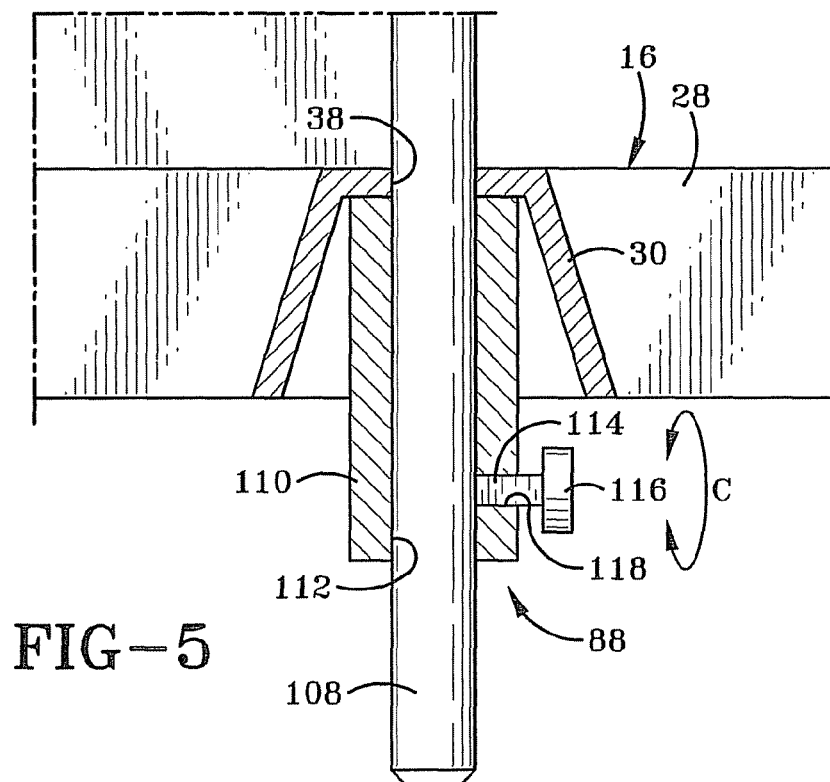
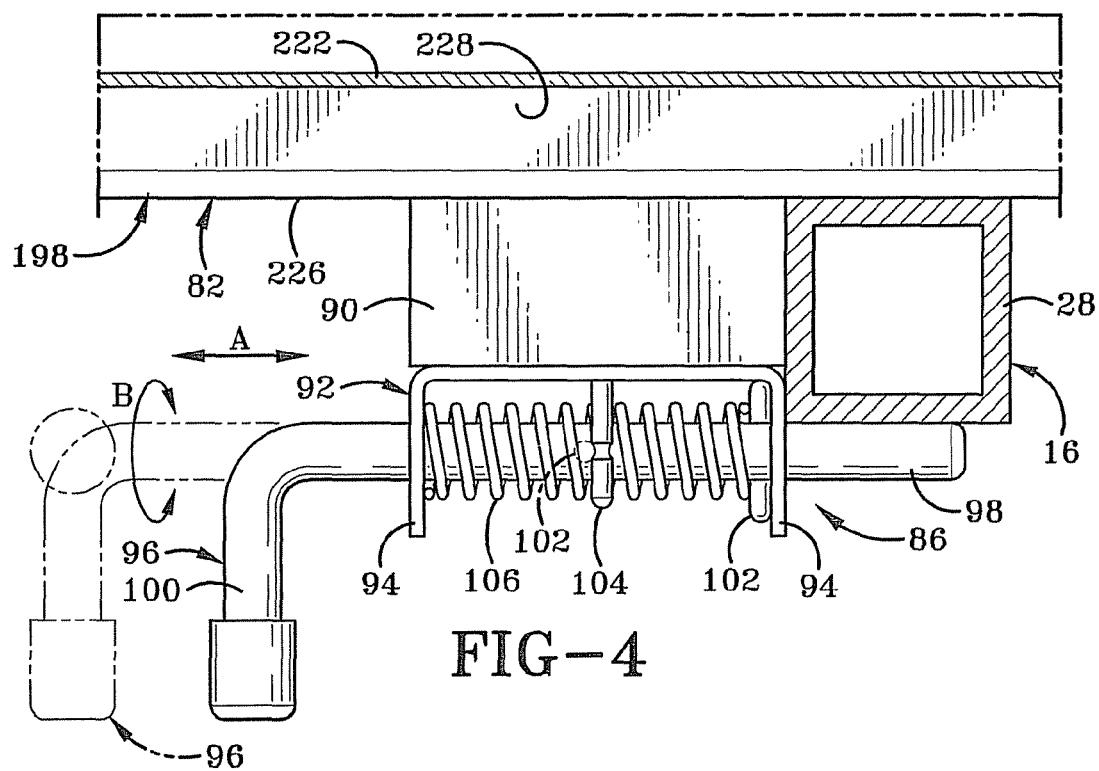
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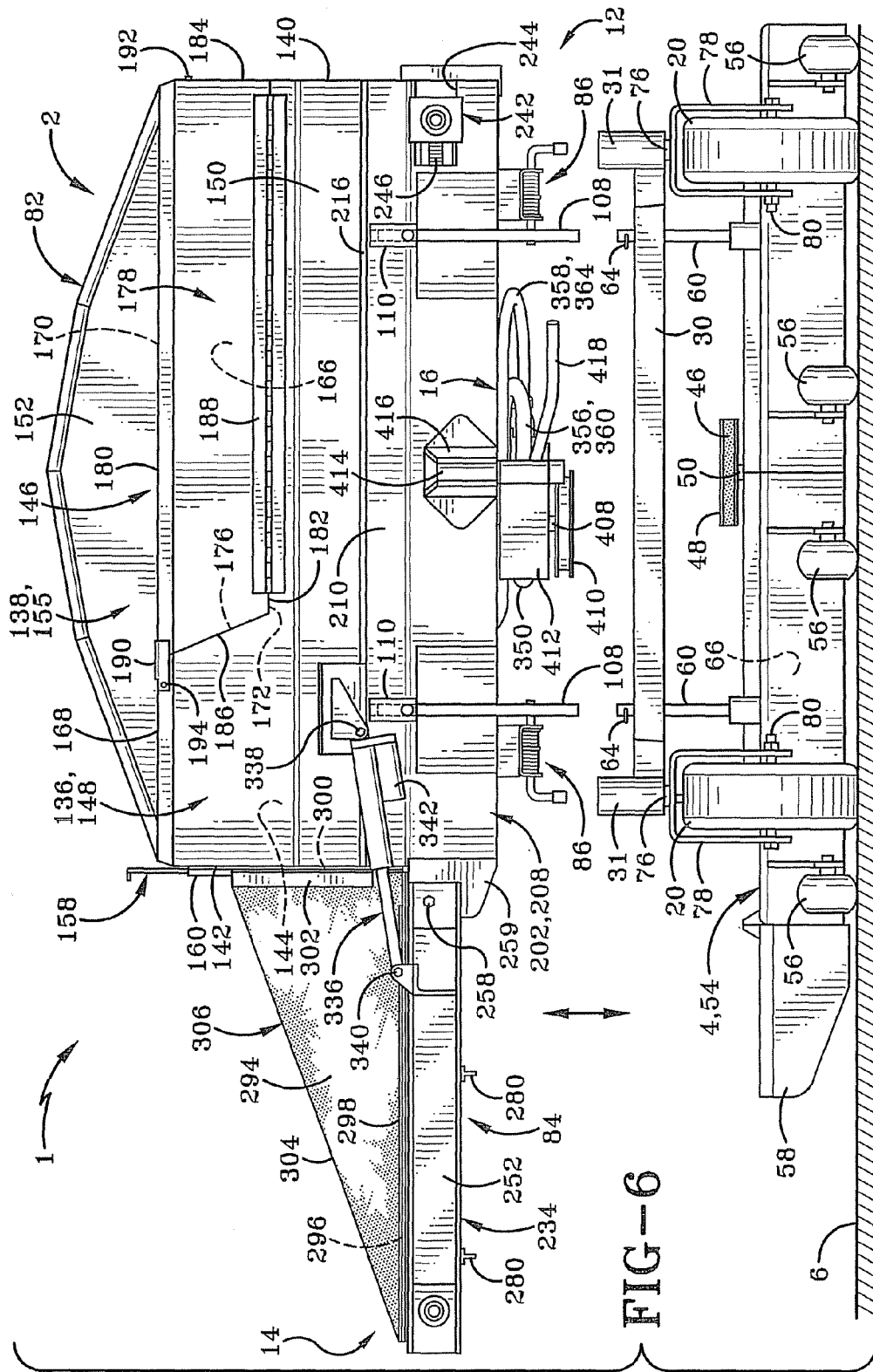
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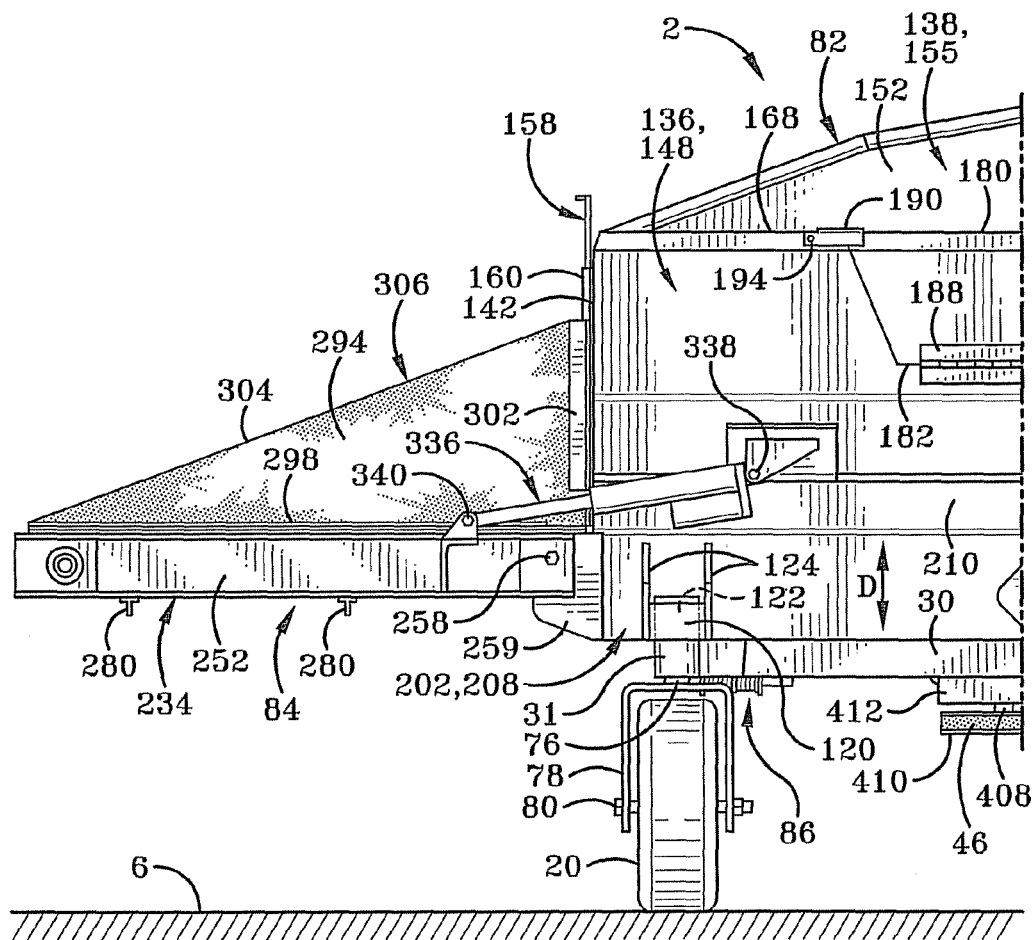


FIG-7

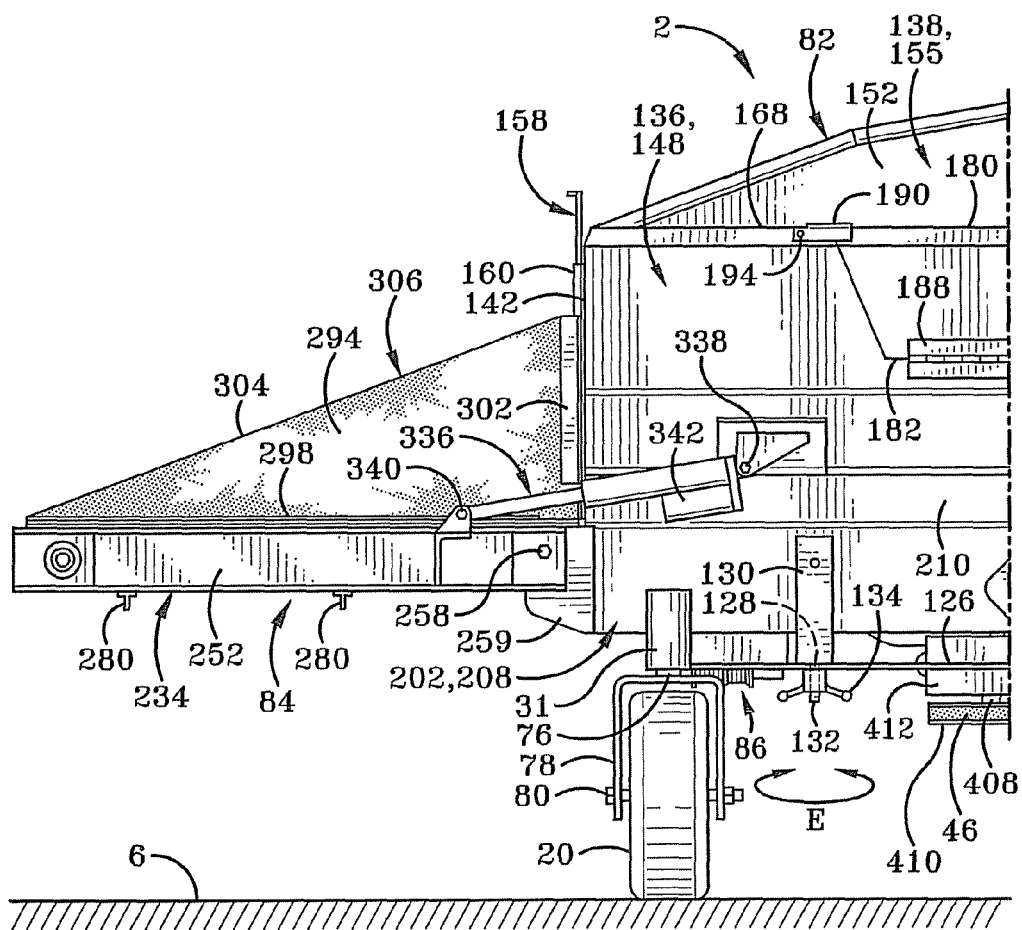
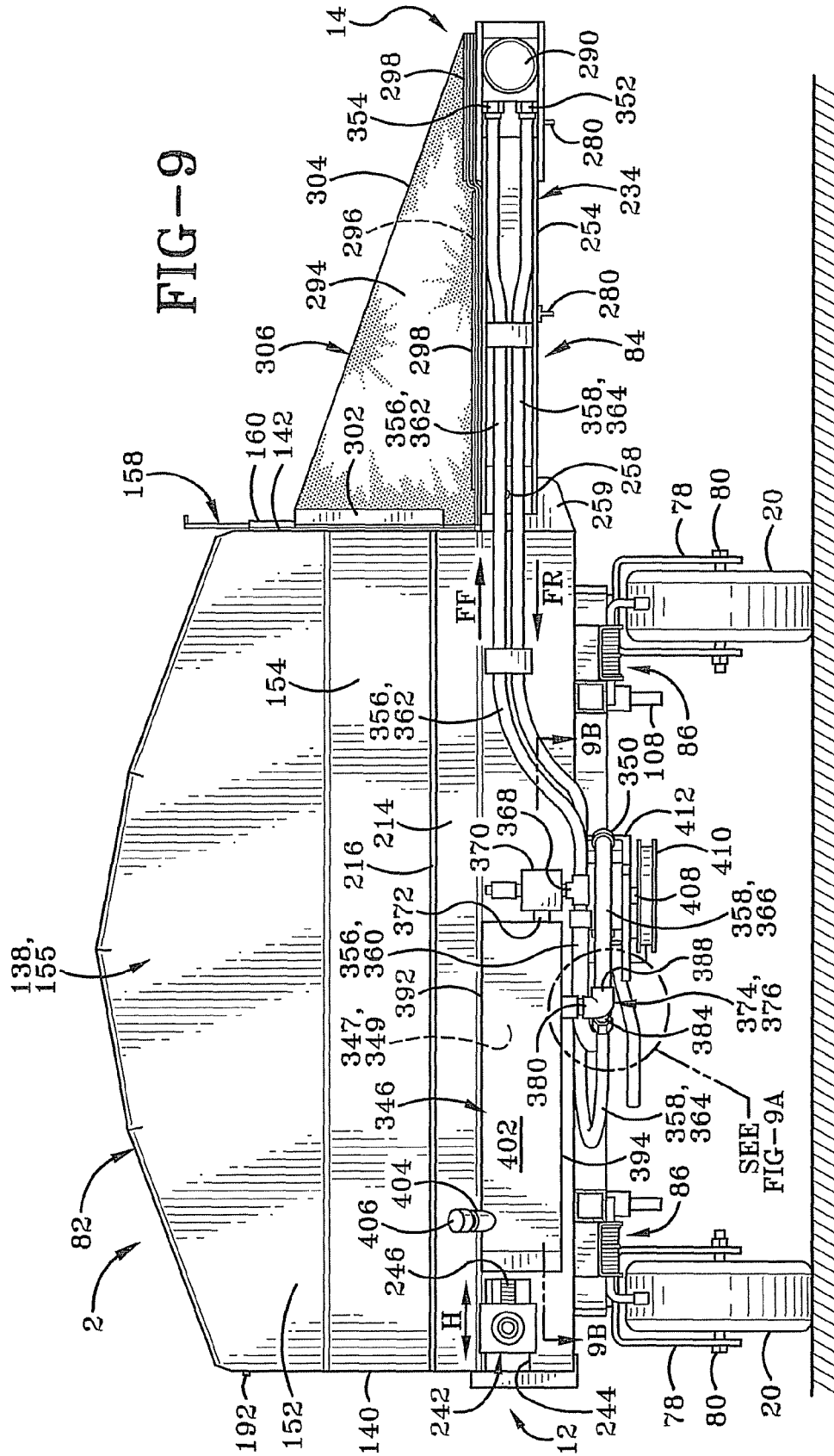


FIG-8



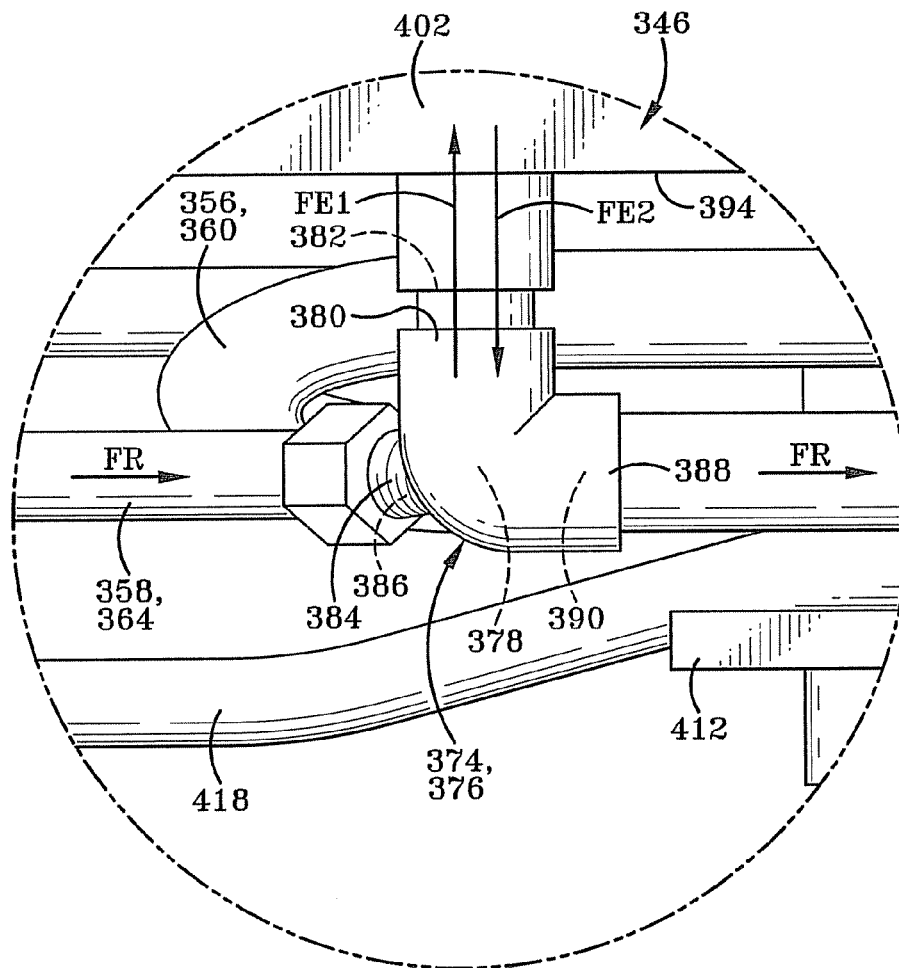


FIG-9A

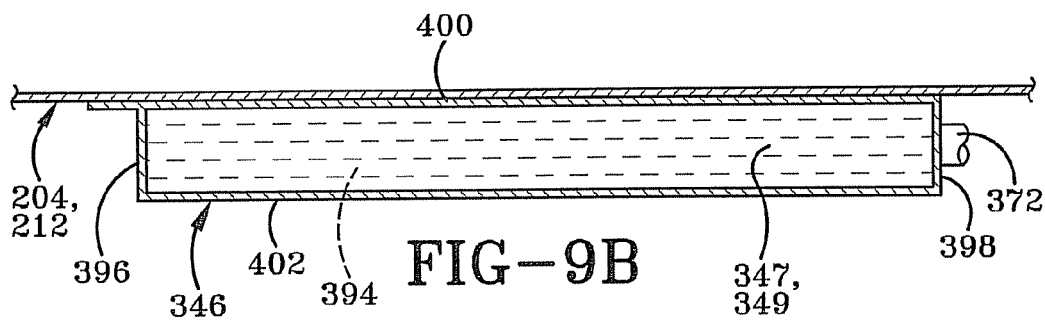


FIG-9B

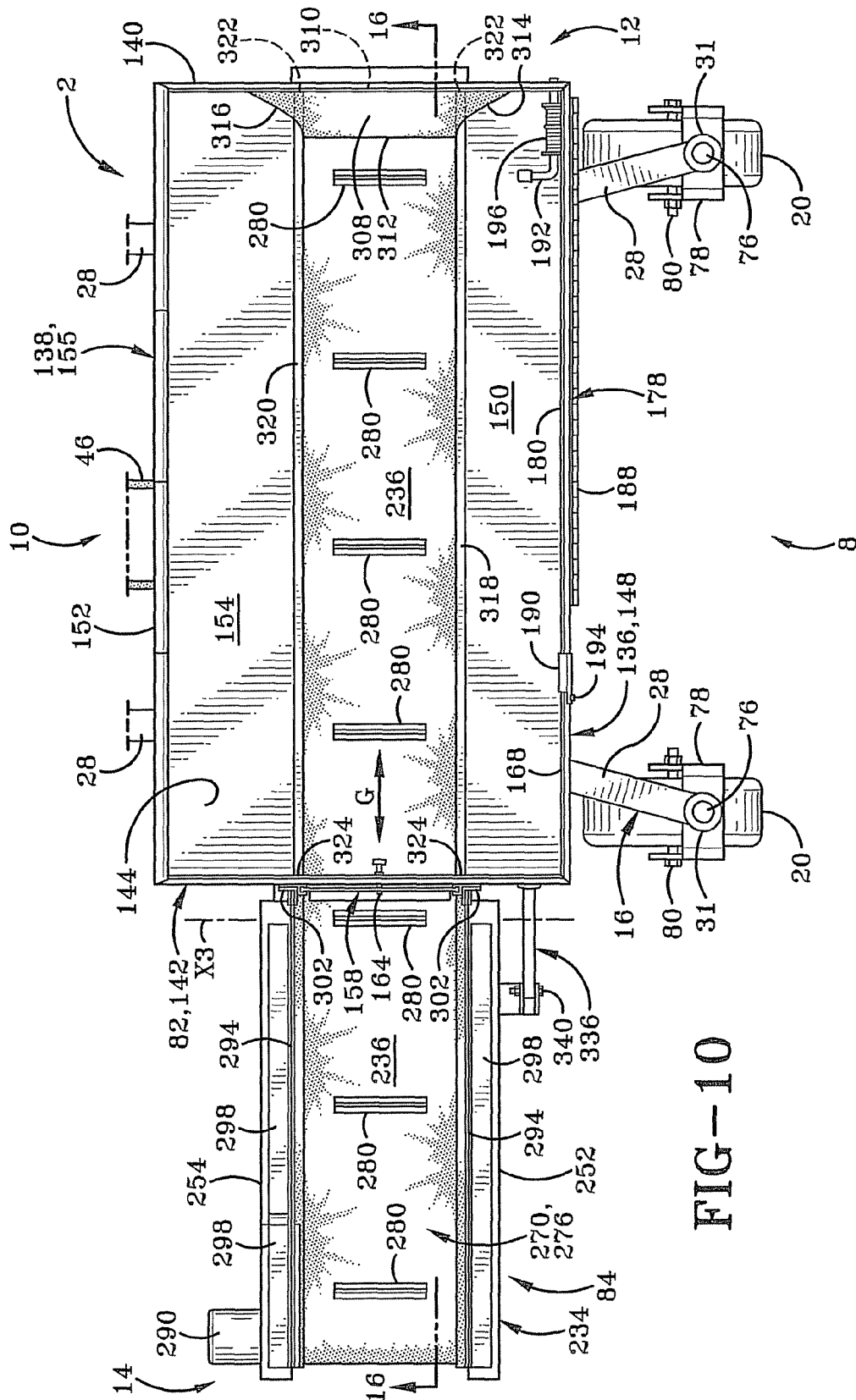


FIG-10

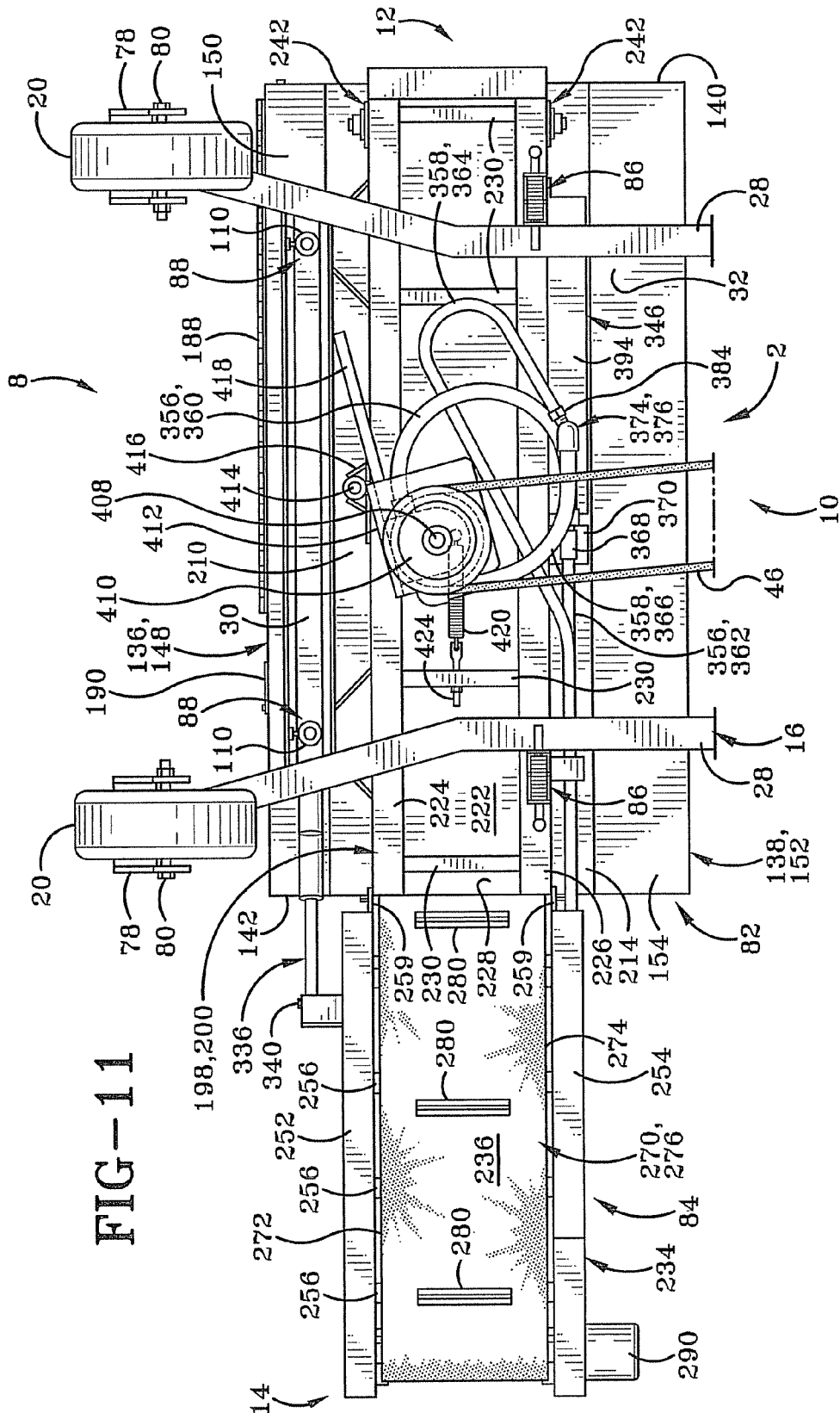
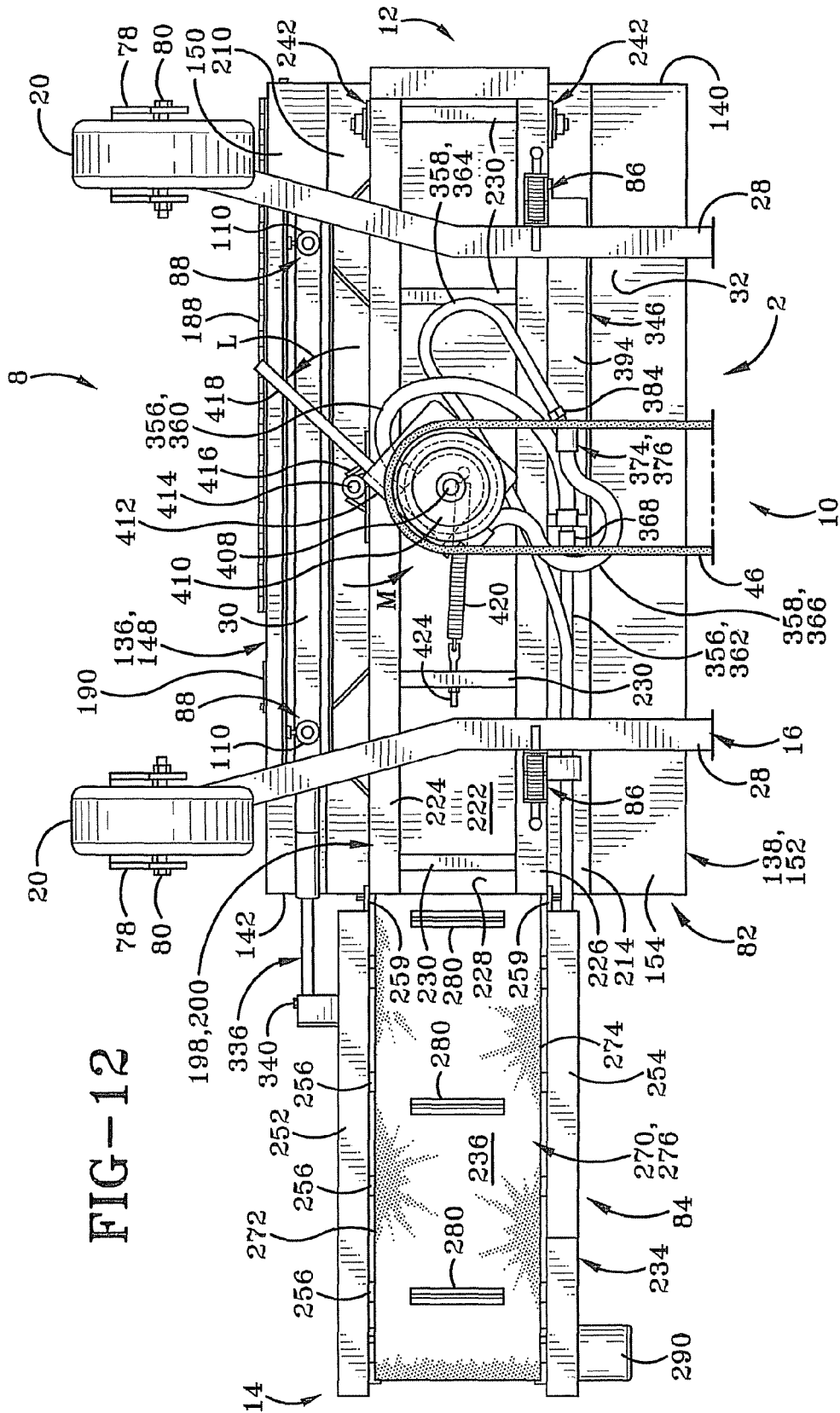


FIG-11



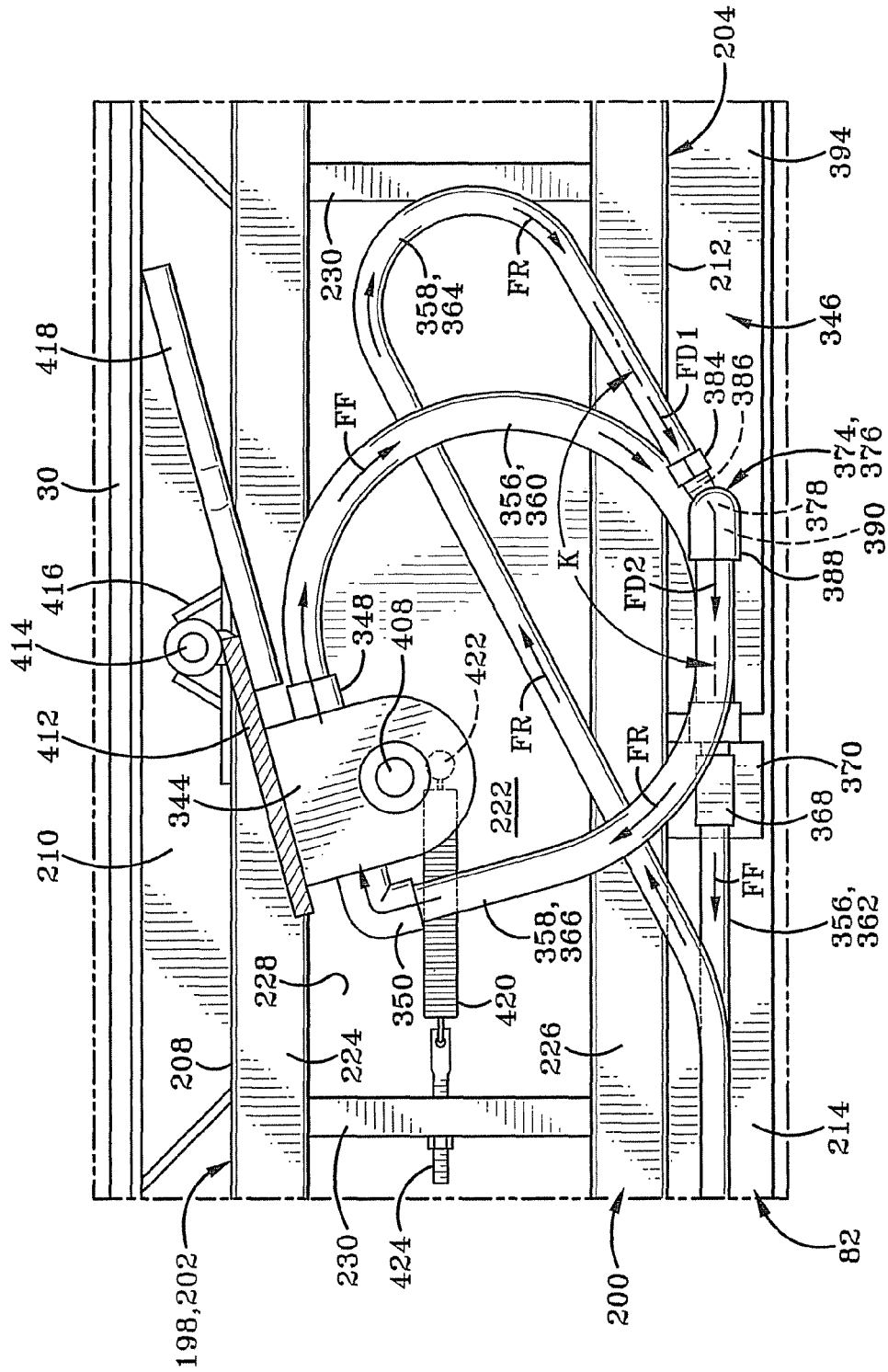


FIG-13

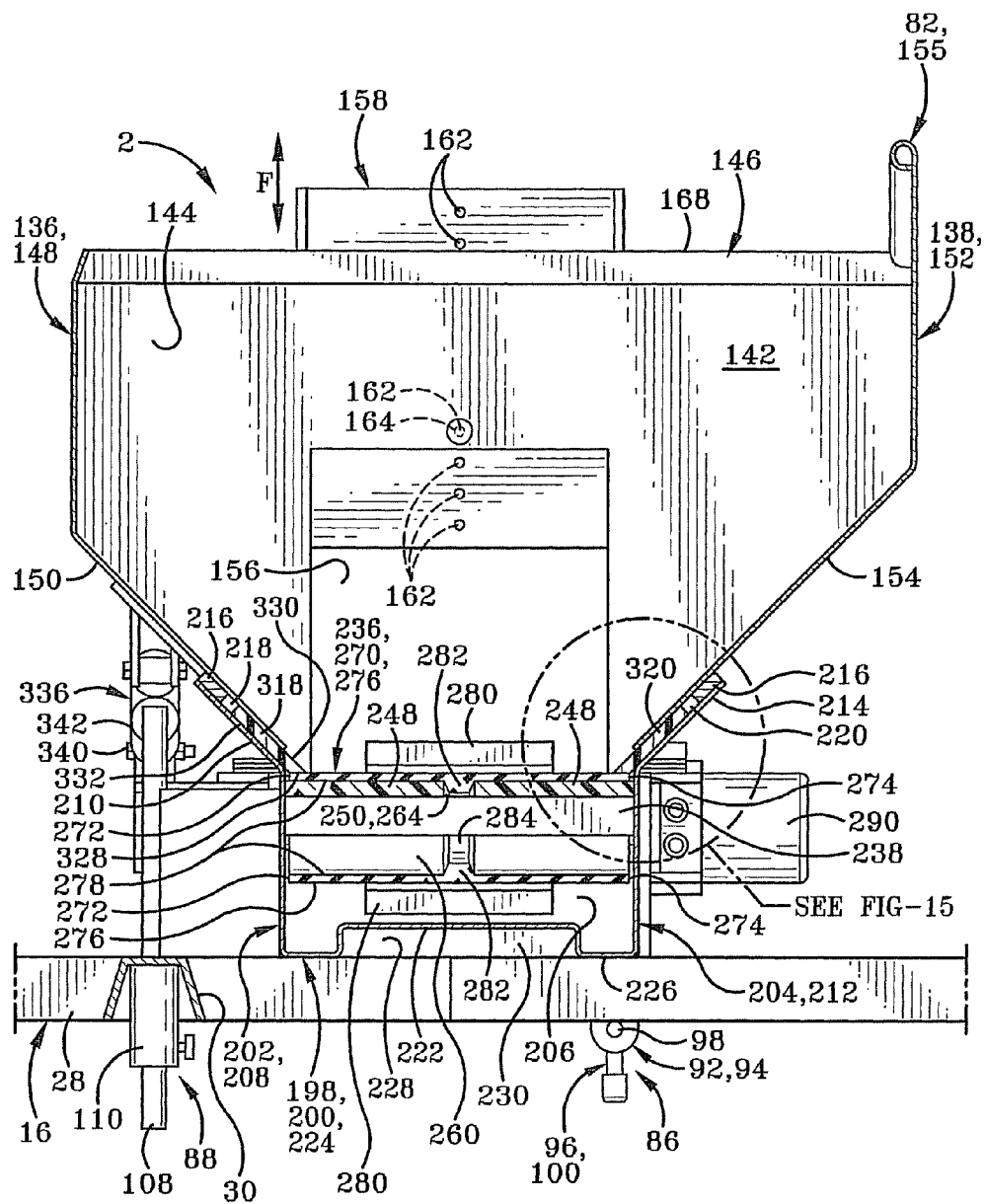


FIG-14

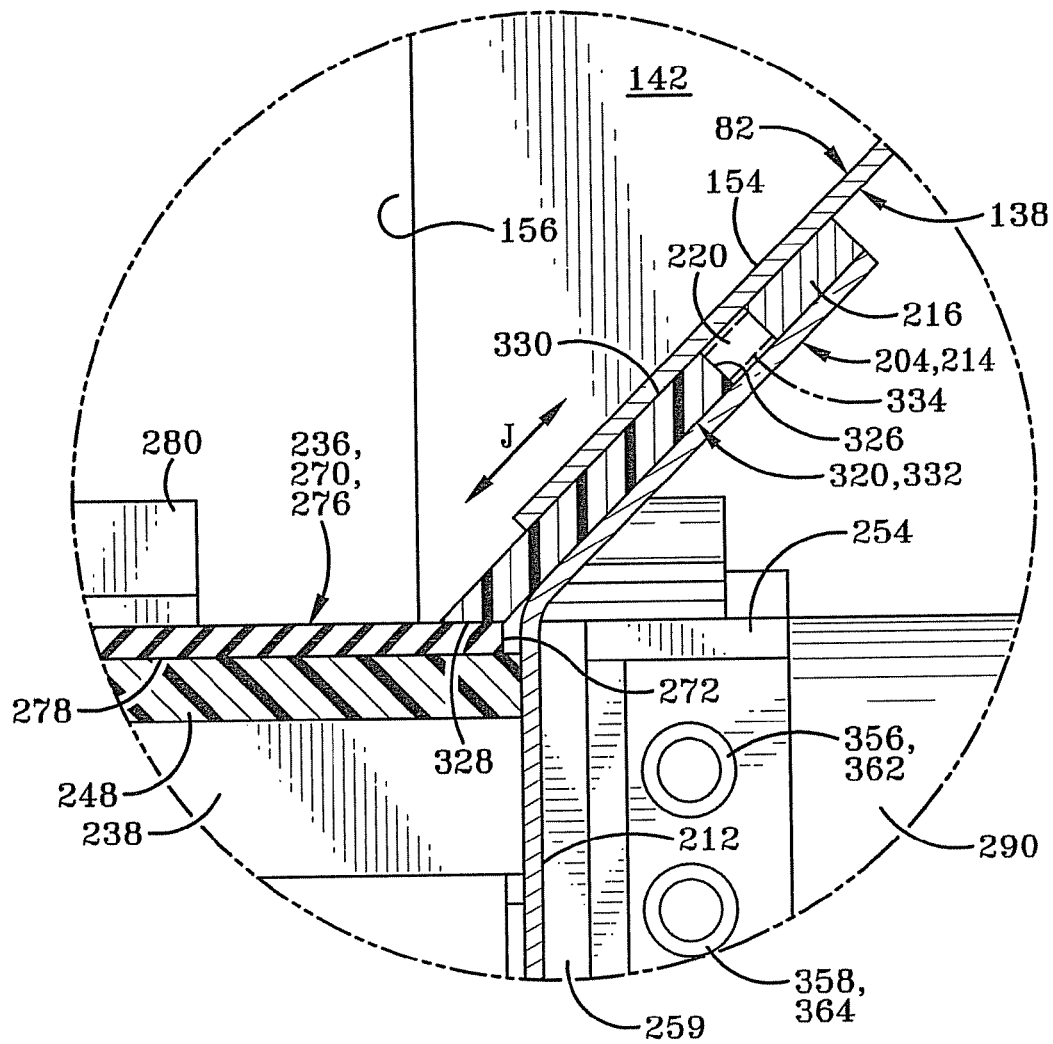
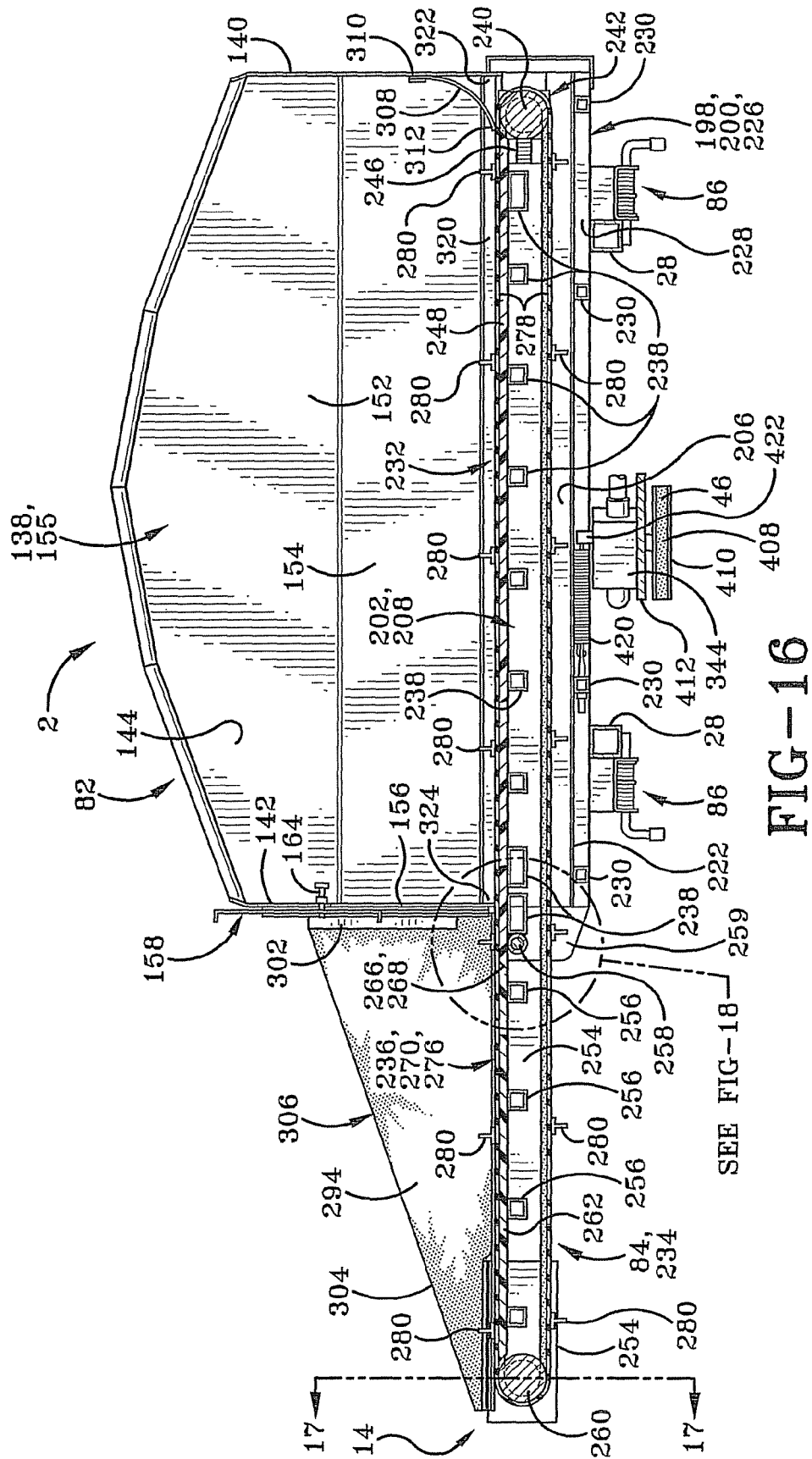


FIG-15



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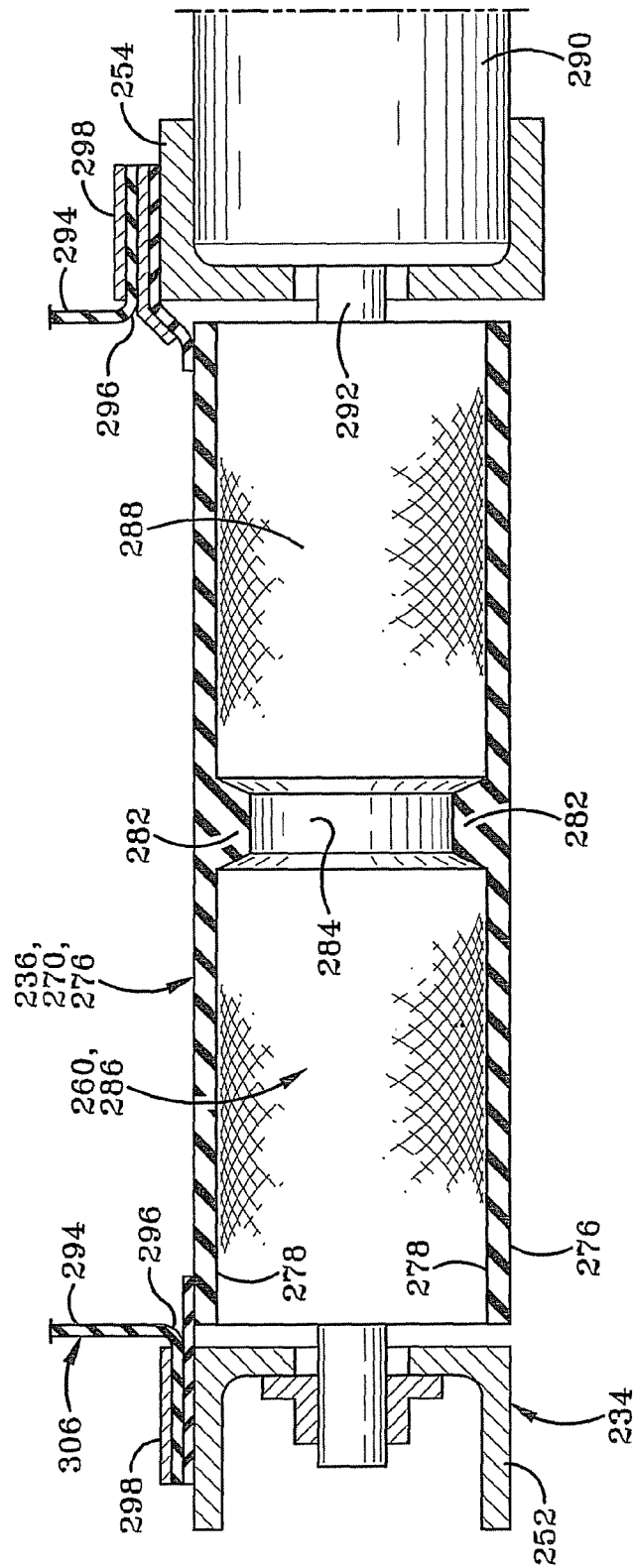


FIG-17

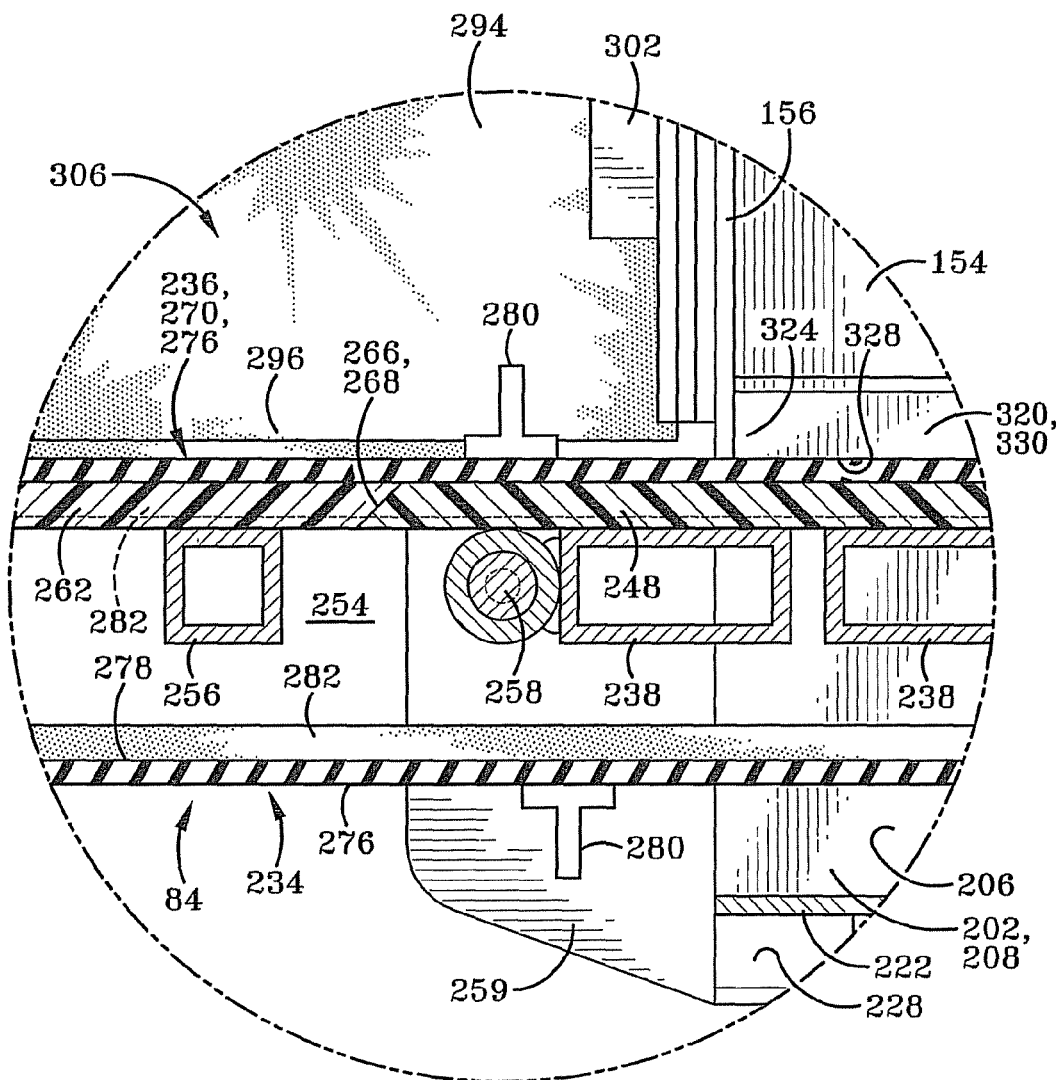


FIG-18

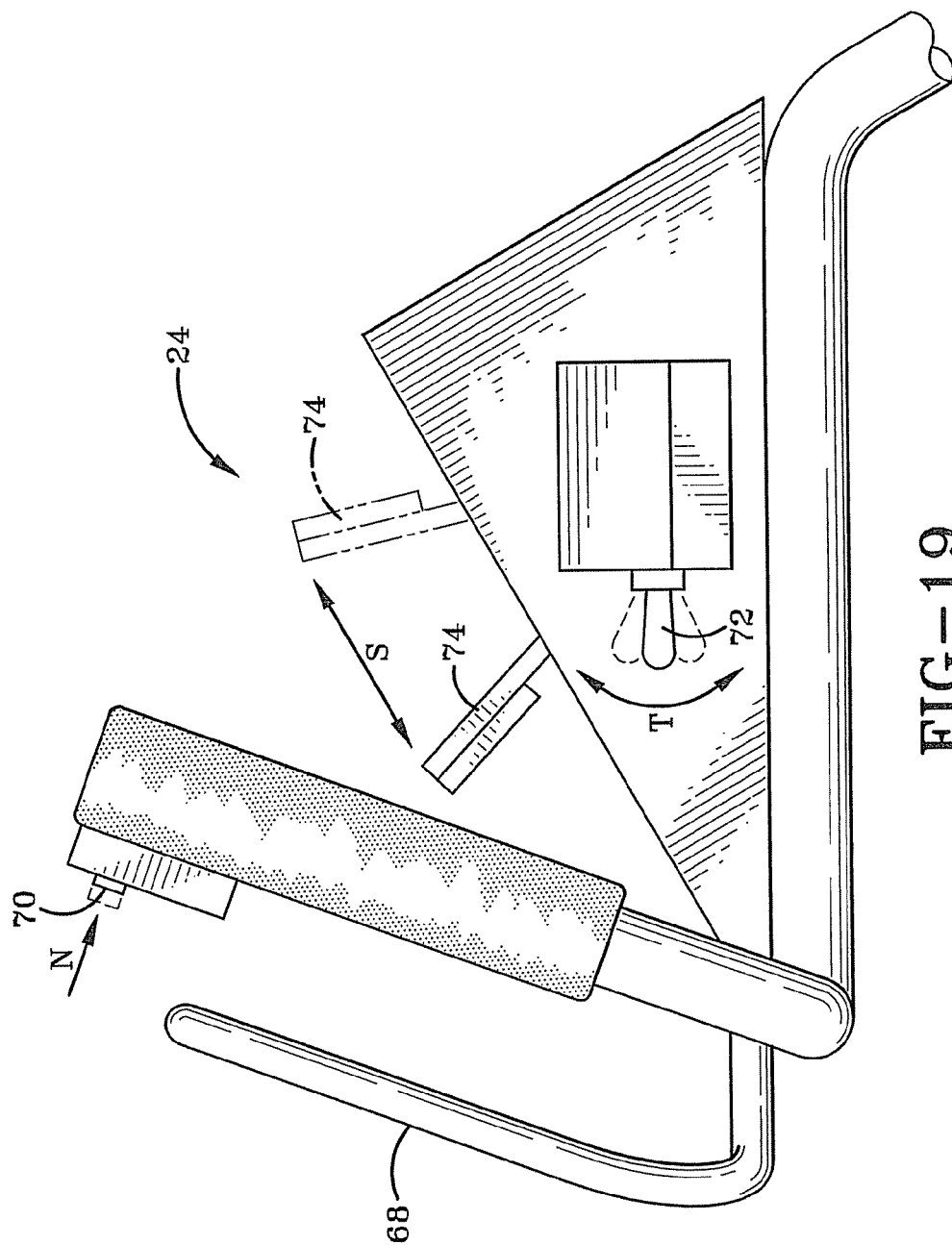


FIG-19

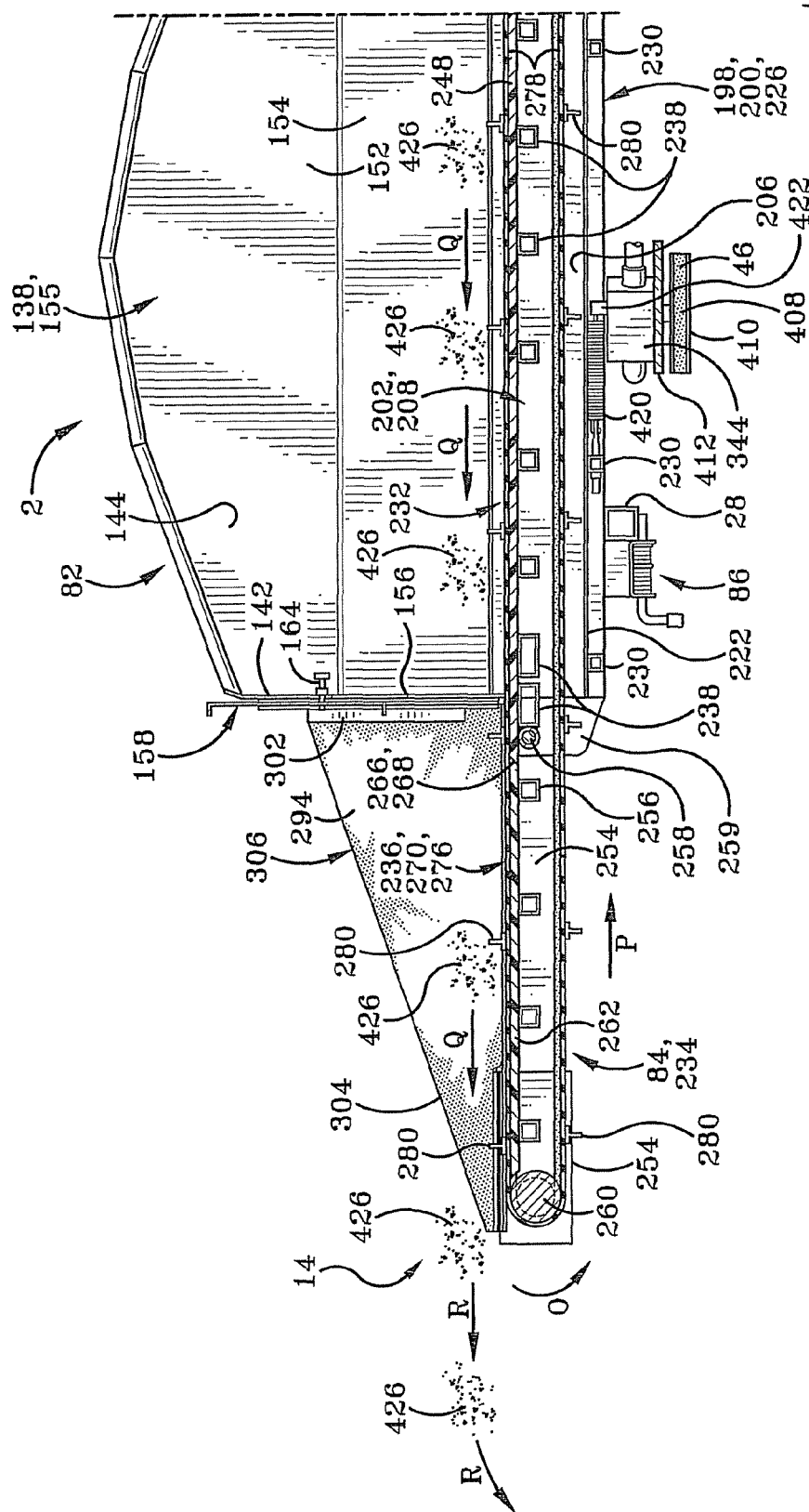


FIG-20

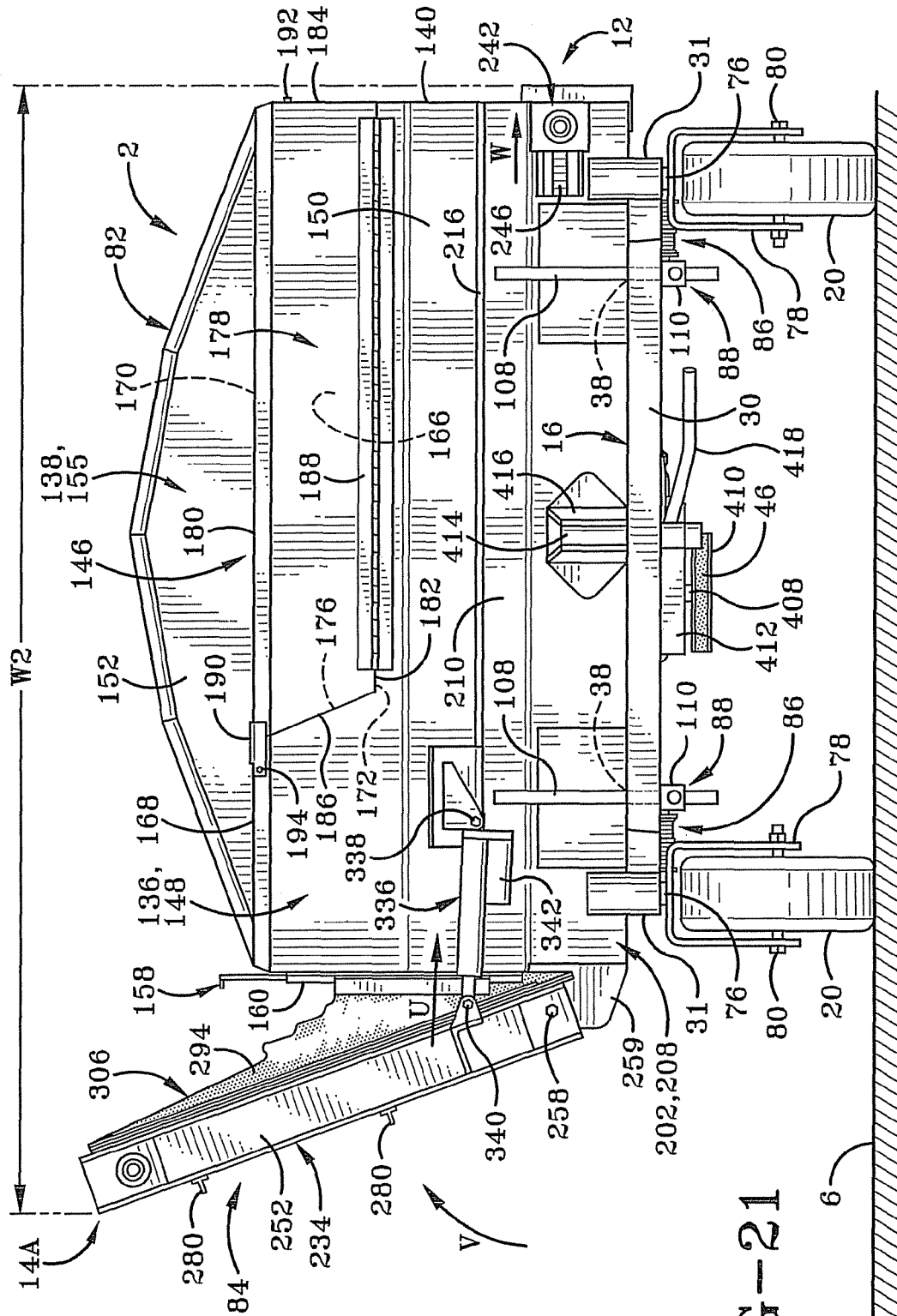


FIG-21

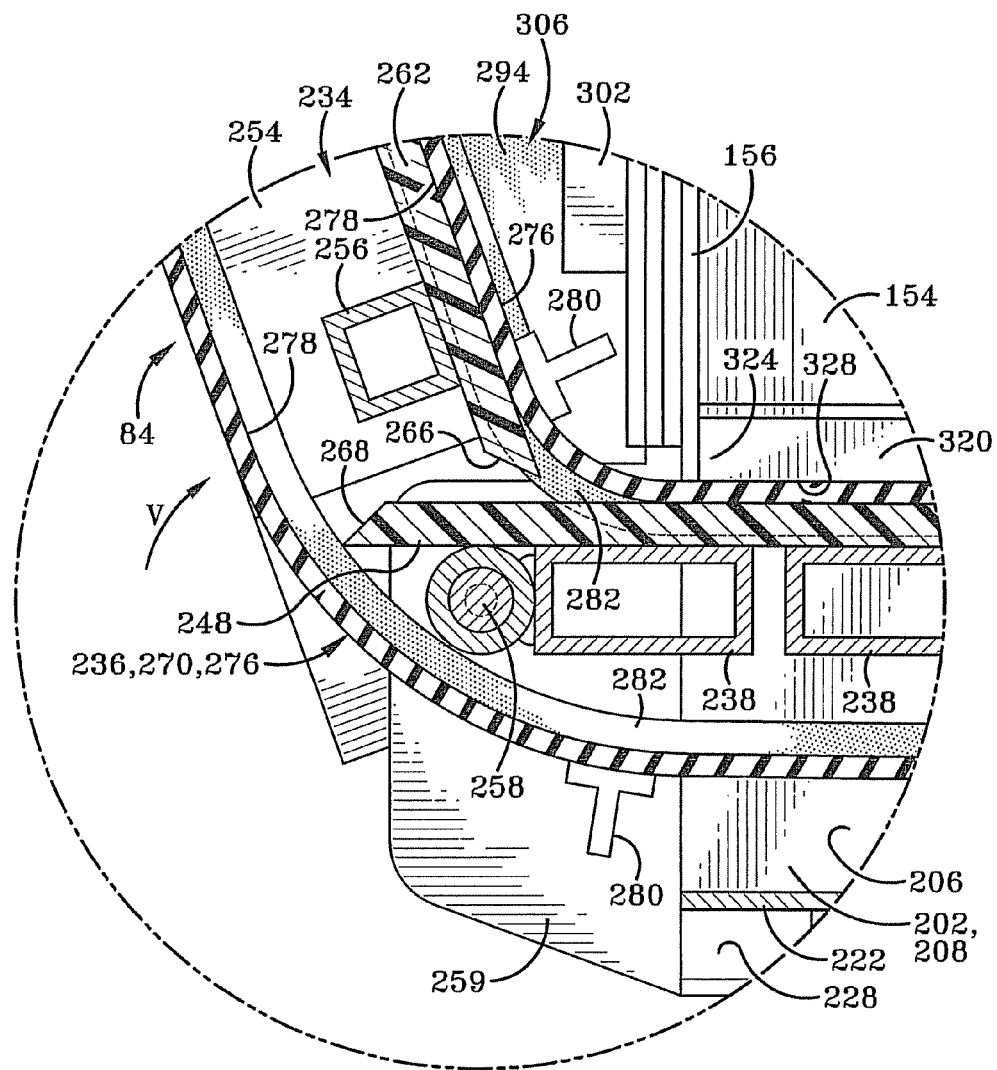


FIG-22

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SELF-PROPELLED POWER UNIT WITH REMOVABLE ATTACHMENT ASSEMBLY

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Technical Field

The present invention is related generally to outdoor power equipment and attachments for use therewith. More particularly, the present invention typically includes a hopper, conveyor belt assembly and hydraulic system typically powered by the engine of the outdoor power equipment. Specifically, the invention is related to such equipment which is configured to throw mulch or other particulate material from within the hopper while the equipment is driven along the ground.

2. Background Information

There is a wide variety of self-propelled outdoor power equipment, such as those used in the landscape, lawn and garden, forestry and utility equipment industries. These self-propelled units may be walk-behind units, stand-on units or sit-on units which typically include three or four wheels. By way of example, such self-propelled units may be in the form of lawnmowers, leaf blowers, snow blowers or throwers, fertilizer spreaders, topdressers, aerators, power brooms, garden tractors, utility vehicles and the like. Many of these units are within the category of lawn care equipment or turf care machines. Some of these units, such as power mowers, may have a zero turning radius whereby they are sometimes referred to as "zero turn" or "z turn" mowers or the like. Many of these units are configured for a single function, such as cutting grass, throwing snow or spreading fertilizer. However, other units may be configured to achieve more than one function, and may include attachments to that end. Many such attachments are configured to be towed or pushed by the self-propelled unit whereby such attachments typically include wheels. Caster or broadcast spreaders have been configured to mount on self-propelled units, such as those described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,502,771 and 6,637,678 both of which were granted to Wyne. In addition, U.S. Pat. No. 5,156,218 granted to Metzler et al. is directed to a landscape edging attachment. Furthermore, topdressers include models utilizing a conveyor belt to deliver particulate material through a rotating brush for distribution onto the ground, as well as those which use a rapidly spinning bar having steel plates secured thereto which strike the particulate material for distribution thereof. In addition, one unit sold under the name "Dakota 410 Rear Conveyor" utilizes a hopper which feeds particulate material onto a rear conveyor belt external to the hopper such that the external conveyor belt feeds the material outwardly to the side of the self-propelled unit. One of the drawbacks to the rear conveyor is that the operator must look back over his or her shoulder while driving the self-propelled unit in order to ensure the proper distribution from the rear conveyor. The present invention addresses this and other needs in the art.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an apparatus comprising: a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit having a front and back defining therebetween a longitudinal direction, left and right sides defining therebetween an axial direction, the unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine whereby the unit is capable of travel in a forward direction; an operator position at which an operator of the unit is positioned during forward travel of the unit; a hopper which is mounted on the frame forward of the operator position and

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which defines an interior chamber; and a conveyor belt which is forward of the operator position and revolvably mounted for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber in the axial direction.

The present invention also provides an apparatus comprising: a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine; a hopper which is mounted on the frame and defines an interior chamber; and a conveyor belt support assembly; a conveyor belt revolvably mounted on the support assembly for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber; a first section of the support assembly; a second section of the support assembly which is movable relative to the first section of the support assembly between an operational position and a stored position.

The present invention further provides an apparatus comprising: a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine; a hopper which is mounted on the frame and defines an interior chamber; and a hydraulic reservoir mounted on the hopper whereby the hopper serves as a heat sink for hydraulic fluid within the reservoir.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

A preferred embodiment of the invention, illustrated of the best mode in which Applicant contemplates applying the principles, is set forth in the following description and is shown in the drawings and is particularly and distinctly pointed out and set forth in the appended claims.

FIG. 1 is a side elevational view of the outdoor power equipment unit of the present invention with the attachment secured thereon.

FIG. 2 is a front elevational view of the unit.

FIG. 3 is a side elevational view similar to FIG. 1 showing the attachment removed from the front of the unit and a mower deck mounted on the frame.

FIG. 4 is an enlarged sectional view taken on line 4-4 of FIG. 1 showing one of the rear mounting mechanisms.

FIG. 5 is an enlarged sectional view taken on line 5-5 of FIG. 2 showing a portion of one of the front mounting mechanisms.

FIG. 6 is a front elevational view corresponding to the configuration in FIG. 3.

FIG. 7 is a front elevational view of a portion of the unit showing an alternate front mounting mechanism.

FIG. 8 is similar to FIG. 7 and shows another alternate front mounting mechanism.

FIG. 9 is a sectional view looking forward and taken generally forward of the engine and rearward of the hopper to provide a rear elevational view of the hopper, conveyor assembly and front portion of the unit.

FIG. 9A is an enlarged rear elevational view of the encircled portion of FIG. 9.

FIG. 9B is a sectional view taken on line 9B-9B of FIG. 9.

FIG. 10 is a top plan view of the portion of the unit shown in FIG. 9.

FIG. 11 is a bottom plan view of the portion of the unit shown in FIGS. 9 and 10 and shows the hydraulic pump and associated sheave in the mounted or tightened position with the drive belt mounted on the sheave.

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FIG. 12 is similar to FIG. 11 and shows the hydraulic pump and associated sheave in a loosened or dismounted position to allow the drive belt to be mounted or dismounted on the sheave.

FIG. 13 is an enlarged sectional view showing the hydraulic pump in the same position as FIG. 11 without the sheave and drive belt.

FIG. 14 is a sectional view taken on line 14-14 of FIG. 2.

FIG. 15 is an enlarged sectional view of the encircled portion of FIG. 14.

FIG. 16 is a sectional view taken on line 16-16 of FIG. 10.

FIG. 17 is a sectional view taken on line 17-17 of FIG. 16.

FIG. 18 is an enlarged sectional view of the encircled portion of FIG. 16.

FIG. 19 is an enlarged side elevational view of the control section of the unit.

FIG. 20 is a sectional view similar to FIG. 16 with portions cut away showing revolving operation of the conveyor belt to discharge particulate material from within the hopper.

FIG. 21 is a front elevational view of the unit showing the extension portion of the conveyor belt assembly having moved from the extended operational position of FIG. 20 to the retracted stored position.

FIG. 22 is similar to FIG. 18 and shows the conveyor belt assembly in the retracted stored position.

Similar numbers refer to similar parts throughout the drawings.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit of the present invention is shown generally at 1 in FIGS. 1-3. Unit 1 may include one or more functional assemblies that perform specific functions or tasks in addition to the self-propelled capability of the unit. For example, unit 1 may include a functional assembly in the form of a hopper and conveyor assembly 2, a mower deck 4 (FIGS. 3, 6) or both. Such functional assemblies may be configured for permanent attachment to the frame of the unit or removably mounted thereon. Removable functional assemblies may be configured for relatively slow removal or relatively rapid removal. The exemplary embodiment illustrates that assembly 2 and mower deck 4 are both configured to be quickly removed or attached to the frame of unit 1 as discussed further below. Unit 1 is configured to travel along the ground 6 while one or both of assembly 2 and mower deck 4 operates to perform its specific functions. Assembly 2 and mower deck 4 are also operable when unit 1 travel is stopped.

Unit 1 has a front 8 and a back 10 defining therebetween a longitudinal direction of the unit. Unit 1 further includes a left side 12 and a right side 14 which define therebetween an axial direction of the unit. Unit 1 includes a rigid frame 16 typically formed of metal and extending from adjacent front 8 to adjacent back 10. Left and right powered or drive wheels 18 (only the right wheel shown) are rotatably mounted on frame 16 generally adjacent the back end 10. Left and right non-powered or driven wheels 20 are rotatably mounted on frame 16 adjacent front end 8. A typically fuel powered engine 22 is mounted on frame 16 generally adjacent the back end for powering rotation of drive wheels 18. Wheels 18 and 20 are ground-engaging wheels which define the bottom of unit 1 and engage and roll on ground 6 to facilitate its travel in the forward (Arrow 23) and rearward directions as well as to the left and to the right. In the exemplary embodiment, unit 1 is configured as a zero turning radius machine although it may be configured with steering capabilities which provide for a

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wider turning range. Unit 1 includes a control assembly 24 mounted adjacent back 10 for controlling the various functions of unit 1.

Unit 1 may be configured as a walk-behind unit or model, as illustrated in solid lines in FIGS. 1 and 3, or may be configured with an operator support platform 26 (dashed lines) which is shown here as a standing platform on which an operator of machine 1 stands during operation, although platform 26 may also represent a seat on which the operator sits during operation of the machine. Where unit 1 is a walk-behind model, the operator will walk behind or stand in an operator position 25 adjacent and directly behind the machine and behind the control assembly 24 with his or her hands on the appropriate controls of assembly 24. Alternately, the operator position may be atop platform 26 or the seat represented thereby with appropriate controls just forward of the operator position. In any of these cases, assembly 2 is forward of the operator position whereby the operator faces forward, as illustrated at Arrow 27, whereby the operator can see the operation of assembly 2 as unit 1 travels forward. This configuration eliminates the difficulty associated with a rear conveyor in which the operator must look rearwardly over his or her shoulder while driving the unit forward.

Frame 16 includes left and right substantially horizontal longitudinal beams or rails 28 (both shown in FIG. 11) which are generally parallel although FIG. 11 illustrates segments of rails 28 which are parallel and forward segments which taper forward and away from each other somewhat. Frame 16 further includes left and right front cylindrical caster mount sleeves 31 which are vertically oriented and hollow and thus define cylindrical passages or holes. Left and right sleeves 31 are secured to rails 28 adjacent their respective front ends adjacent front end 8 of unit 1. Frame 16 further includes a front axial crossbar 30, which is one of a plurality of substantially horizontal crossbars which extend between and are rigidly secured to rails 28. Rails 28 define therebetween an open space 32 (FIG. 11) which extends rearwardly from front crossbar 30 to adjacent the front of engine 22. Space 32 serves as a through opening having top and bottom entrance openings 34 and 36 (FIG. 3) such that portions of assembly 2 or other components may pass into and through space 32 from the top or bottom. Left and right forward mounting holes 38 (FIG. 2) and rearward mounting holes 40 are formed in frame 16 and are used for mounting mower deck 4 on frame 16. In the embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 1-3, forward holes 38 are also used in mounting attachment 2 on frame 16. Holes 38 and 40 are typically through holes formed through a horizontal beam or plate, and in the exemplary embodiment forward holes 38 are formed through front crossbar 30.

In addition to powering the rotation of drive wheels 18, engine 22 has a drive shaft 42 and a sheave 44 secured to and rotatable with drive shaft 42 about a vertical axis. A closed loop drive belt 46 is revolvably mounted on and engages sheave 44 as well as a sheave 48 of mower deck 4 (FIG. 3) when deck 4 is mounted on frame 16. Sheave 48 is secured to another shaft 50 and is rotatable therewith about a vertical axis passing through shaft 50. Mower deck 4 includes one or more mower blades 52 which rotate about a respective vertical axis and are rotatably driven by the rotation of sheave 48 and axle 50. Although a single mower blade 52 may be used on certain models, it is common for commercial mowers to include two or three blades 52 which are offset from one another such that one of the blades 52 is secured to shaft 50 while the other blade or blades are secured to respective shafts having respective sheaves which are driven by another drive belt, as is well known in the art. Mower deck 4 includes a rigid heavy duty housing 54 on which the mower blades are rotat-

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ably mounted and on which several ground engaging mower deck wheels **56** are rotatably mounted to facilitate maintaining the lower deck and blades at the proper height during operation. Deck **4** further includes a discharge chute **58** typically pivotally mounted on housing **4** and extending outwardly to the side through which grass clippings and the like are discharged during the mowing process. In the exemplary embodiment, unit **1** without assembly **2** is configured as a lawnmower with which the operator cuts grass of ground **6** with blades **52**.

A mounting assembly is provided for mounting mower deck **4** on frame **16**. In the exemplary embodiment, this mounting assembly includes left and right front rods **60** and left and right rear rods **62** (only the right rod shown) typically pivotally mounted on housing **54** and extend vertically upwardly therefrom when deck **4** is mounted on frame **16**. Cotter pins **64** or the like are used to secure rods **60** and **62** on frame **16** in a standard fashion and thus serve as stops which engage the top of the corresponding beam or other portion of frame **16** through which holes **38** and **40** are formed to limit the downward movement of deck **4** relative to frame **16**. Rods **60** and **62** are respectively slidably received within holes **38** and **40** such that rods **60** and **62** may slide upwardly and downwardly within said holes to allow for some vertical adjustment of deck **4** during operation. The mounting of deck **4** on frame **16** thus is relatively simple, and involves the insertion of rods **60** and **62** upwardly through holes **38** and **40** respectively and the insertion of cotter pins **64** through respective holes formed adjacent the top of rods **60** and **62**. Belt **46** is also mounted around sheaves **44** and **48** when deck **4** is mounted on frame **16**. The removal of deck **4** from frame **16** thus involves the opposite steps, namely removing belt **46** from sheave **48**, removing cotter pins **64** and lowering rods **60** and **62** downwardly out of holes **38** and **40**.

Lower deck **4** is mounted within a lower deck mounting space **66** which is defined by the configuration of deck **4** when mounted on frame **16** and is typically entirely lower than rails **28**. When lower deck **4** is removed from frame **16**, space **66** is thus an open space. Deck **4** and space **66** extend longitudinally as viewed from beside from adjacent rear drive wheels **18** to adjacent front driven wheels **20**, and in the axial direction from adjacent the left wheels **18** and **20** to adjacent the right wheels **18** and **20**. In the exemplary embodiment, deck **4** extends outwardly to the left beyond the left wheels **18** and **20** and left longitudinal rail **28** and outwardly to the right beyond the right wheels **18** and **20** and right longitudinal rail **28**. A substantial portion of deck **4** and space **66** is directly below space **32** with portions also directly below rails **28** and cross-bar **30**. Deck **4** and space **66** are for the most part forward of engine **22** and rear wheels **18** and mostly rearward of front wheels **20**.

Control assembly **24** includes a control panel mounted on handle bars or other supporting structure secured to frame **16**. A plurality of controls are mounted on the control panel, including a drive wheel control **68**, a conveyor belt control **70**, a conveyor extension control **72** and a throttle **74**. Although only one is shown, the drive wheel control typically includes a left and right drive wheel control **68** for respectively controlling the driving rotation of the left and right drive wheels **18**. A gear shift, ignition switch and other controls may be mounted on the control panel although they are not shown in the figures. Throttle **74** controls the speed or RPMs of engine **22** and consequently the speed of rotation or RPMs of shaft **42** and sheave **44**, which in the exemplary embodiment is directly proportional to the RPMs of engine **22**. The rotation of sheave **48**, **50** and blade or blades **52** is thus also directly proportional to the speed or RPMs of engine **22**.

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In the exemplary embodiment, wheels **20** are caster wheels which are thus respectively part of left and right caster wheel assemblies. Each of the caster wheel assemblies includes a pivot **76**, a caster wheel bracket **70** which is rigidly secured to and extends downwardly from pivot **76** and an axle **80** about which each wheel **20** is rotatably mounted. More particularly, pivot **76** typically includes a substantially cylindrical rod which is rotatably received within caster mount sleeve **31** of frame **16** whereby the entire caster wheel assembly is rotatable about a vertical axis **X1** passing through pivot **76**. Caster wheel bracket **78** is a generally inverted U-shaped structure having a generally horizontal upper portion and a pair of spaced legs extending downwardly therefrom whereby axle **80** extends between the legs of the bracket so that each wheel **20** is rotatable about a substantially horizontal axis.

In accordance with the invention, assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**, and in the exemplary embodiment is removably mounted thereon forward of rear wheels **18**, engine **22**, control assembly **24** and the operator position shown at **25** or atop the seat or platform **26**. FIGS. **1** and **2** show the attached or mounted position of assembly **2** while FIGS. **3** and **6** show a dismounted or detached position of assembly **2**. The primary components of assembly **2** are a rigid hopper **82** formed primarily of metal and a conveyor assembly or conveyor belt assembly **84** which is secured to hopper **84** adjacent its lower end for discharging mulch or other particulate material from within hopper **82**. Assembly **2** includes left and right rear mounting mechanisms **86** which are respectively mounted along the bottom of hopper **82** respectively adjacent the left and right ends thereof. Left and right front mounting mechanisms **88** are also provided for mounting assembly **2** on frame **16**. When assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**, hopper **82** is fixed relative to the frame **16**.

Each rear mounting mechanism **86** (FIG. **4**) includes a rigid tubular mounting block **90** which is rigidly secured to and extends downwardly from the bottom of hopper **82**. Mechanism **86** further includes a rigid inverted U-shaped mounting bracket **92** which is rigidly secured to and extends downwardly from block **90** and includes a pair of spaced downwardly extending legs **94**. A rigid L-shaped mounting member **96** has a horizontal first leg **98** and a second leg **100** which is secured to the outer end of leg **98** and extends perpendicularly therefrom. A rigid pin **102** passes through a hole formed in leg **98** and extends radially outwardly therefrom. A pair of rigid pins **104** (only one shown) are secured to the mounting bracket **92** and extend downwardly about midway between legs **94**. A coil spring **106** encircles a portion of leg **98** and extends from the outer leg **94** to pin **102**. Arrow **A** in FIG. **4** illustrates that mounting member **96** is movable horizontally inwardly and outwardly between a securing or mounting position shown in solid lines and an unsecured position shown in dashed lines. More particularly, each of legs **94** defines a hole through which leg **98** passes whereby leg **98** is slidable inwardly and outwardly and also rotatable (Arrow **B**) within said holes.

In the secured position, the inner portion of leg **98** is positioned directly below the corresponding rail **28** and serves as a stop which engages the bottom of rail **28** to prevent upward movement of assembly **2**, thereby mounting assembly **2** on frame **16**. When assembly **2** is mounted on rail **16**, the bottom of hopper **18** is seated on the top of rails **28** and blocks **90** and/or the inner leg **94** is closely adjacent or abuts the respective rail to minimize or eliminate axial side to side movement of hopper **82**. In the unsecured position of mounting member **96**, leg **98** is withdrawn to the degree that it is no longer directly beneath rail **28** whereby a sufficient upper force allows assembly **2** to be lifted upwardly off of frame **16**. For

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convenience, the rotation of member 96 when pin 102 moves beyond pins 104 with spring 106 compressed allows pin 102 to engage pins 104 whereby pin 102 and pins 104 serve as retaining members to retain the locking member 96 in the unsecured position. Spring 106 biases mounting member 96 to the secured position when pins 102 and 104 do not engage one another. In the unsecured position, spring 106 biases pin 102 against retaining pins 104 within the notch formed in each pin 104. When assembly 2 is used as a retrofit attachment, the mounting mechanism 86 thus provides a mounting mechanism which does not require any alteration of the frame 16 or other portions of unit 1 which would void the manufacturer's warranty on the original unit. Thus, no holes need to be drilled in the frame or other portions of unit 1 in order to attach assembly 2 to frame 16. In addition, rear mounting mechanism 86 provides the ability to rapidly mount or dismount assembly 2 on frame 16.

Each front mounting mechanism 88 (FIG. 5) includes a mounting member in the form of a rigid vertical rod 108 which is rigidly secured via a mounting bracket to the front of the lower portion of hopper 82 and extends downwardly below the bottom of the hopper to a bottom terminal end. Rod 108 is disposed within hole 38 when assembly 2 is attached to frame 16. Thus, rod 60 for mounting lower deck 4 must be removed from hole 38 in order to insert rod 108 into hole 38. Mechanism 88 further includes a rigid cylindrical sleeve 110 defining a vertical through passage or hole 112 which receives rod 108. The top of sleeve 110 abuts or is closely adjacent a downwardly facing surface of crossbar 30 at the bottom of hole 38 in the secured position to prevent upward movement of rod 108 out of hole 38. Mechanism 88 further includes a threaded member including a thread shaft 114 and an enlarged head 116 such that shaft 114 threadedly engages a threaded hole 118 extending from the outer surface of sleeve 110 to the inner surface which defines hole 112. Head 116 is typically knurled to facilitate the rotational threading of threaded member into or out of hole 118 by simple manual engagement without the use of tools. The rotation of the threaded member is illustrated at Arrow C in FIG. 5.

Thus, assembly 2 is attached to frame 16 by inserting each rod 108 downwardly through a respective hole 38, then sliding sleeve 110 upwardly from the bottom terminal end of rod 108 until the top of sleeve 110 abuts or is closely adjacent the downwardly facing surface of crossbar 30. At this point, the threaded member is rotated by the threaded engagement between shaft 114 and threaded hole 118 causes the tip of the shaft to engage the outer surface of rod 108 in order to secure sleeve 110 on rod 108. Detachment of assembly 2 thus involves the reverse procedure in which the threaded member is unscrewed so that sleeve 110 can be slid downwardly off of rod 108 and rod 108 may be lifted upwardly out of hole 38. As with the rear mounting mechanism 86, front mounting mechanism 88 thus allows for the mounting and dismounting of assembly 2 on frame 16 without voiding a manufacturer's warranty by drilling holes in the original unit or otherwise damaging the unit. Conveniently for temporary storage purposes, each sleeve 110 and the corresponding threaded member may be mounted atop an upper end of the corresponding rod 108 by sliding the sleeve over the upper end and tightening the screw to secure sleeve on rod 108, as illustrated in FIG. 6. Although rod 108 is inserted through the same holes 38 which are used to mount the mower deck via rods 60, other suitable mounting mechanisms may be used.

In accordance with the invention, assembly 2 is mounted on frame 16, and in the exemplary embodiment is removably mounted thereon. The front mounting mechanisms 88 are particularly configured for mounting assembly 2 on the frame

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of a particular manufacturer's unit when the mower deck 4 is removed therefrom. FIGS. 7 and 8 illustrate two alternate front mounting mechanisms which are respectively configured for two other specific configurations of different manufacturers or models of the unit. More particularly, FIG. 7 illustrates an alternate front mounting mechanism which includes a mounting member in the form of a rigid typically metal cylindrical sleeve 120 defining a vertical cylindrical passage or hole 122 wherein sleeve 120 is secured to hopper 82 adjacent the bottom thereof between a pair of rigid metal vertical mounting plates 124 of a mounting bracket whereby sleeve 120 is rigidly secured to hopper 82. In the mounted or attached position of assembly 2, caster mount sleeve 31 is received within passage 122 of hopper mount sleeve 120. Arrow D in FIG. 7 shows the upward and downward movement of assembly 2 including sleeve 122 such that vertical upward movement thereof causes sleeve 120 to slide off of sleeve 31 to dismount assembly 2 and downward vertical movement causes sleeve 120 to slide downwardly over sleeve 31 to slidably receive sleeve 31 within hole 122 of sleeve 120. As shown in FIG. 7, the rear mounting mechanism 86 is the same.

FIG. 8 illustrates that the frame of the unit includes a rigid front horizontal metal plate 126 which is generally adjacent and extends between front wheels 120. A manufacturer's through hole 128 is formed in plate 126 extending from its top to its bottom. For the present purposes, a manufacturer's hole is defined herein as being a hole formed by the original manufacturer wherein the hole may have been used for purposes of manufacturing or assembling the unit, but is not used in the final product. Thus, no portion of the original manufacturer's unit extends through hole 128. Where applicant's assembly 2 is a retrofit attachment, the configuration in FIG. 8 is intended to utilize the manufacturer's hole 128 and thereby once again avoid voiding the manufacturer's warranty by drilling additional holes or otherwise damaging the original unit. The alternate front mounting mechanism shown in FIG. 8 includes a rigid mounting bracket 130 which is rigidly secured to the lower portion of hopper 82 and extends downwardly therefrom to a bottom end from which an externally threaded rod or shaft 132 extends downwardly. Shaft 132 is inserted downwardly through hole 128 with the bottom of bracket 130 seated atop plate 126 and with an internally threaded member in the form of a wing nut 134 threaded onto shaft 132 to abut the bottom of plate 126, thereby securing assembly 2 on the frame and prevent its upward movement therefrom. Preferably, wing nut 134 includes relatively large wings which may be manually engaged for easy rotation of the wing nut (Arrow E) to tighten and loosen the nut on shaft 132 without the use of tools. Again, the configuration of FIG. 8 retains the rear mounting mechanism 86. Advantageously, the use of rear mounting mechanism 86 with any of the front mounting mechanisms discussed above allows attachment 2 to be rapidly attached to or removed from frame 16.

Hopper 82 is now described with primary reference to FIGS. 1-3, 6 and 9-11. Hopper 82 includes front and back side walls 136 and 138, and left and right side walls 140 and 142 defining there within an interior chamber 144 having a top entrance opening 146. Front side wall 136 includes an upper vertical segment 148 and an angled lower segment 150 which is secured to and angles rearwardly and downwardly from the bottom of vertical segment 148. Back side wall 138 includes a vertical upper segment 152 and an angled lower segment 154 which is secured to and angles downwardly and forward from the bottom of vertical upper segment 152. Left side wall 140 is substantially vertical and is secured to and extends between the left ends of front and back side walls 136 and

138. Right side wall 142 is also substantially vertical and is secured to and extends between the right ends of front and back side walls 136 and 138. Vertical upper segment 152 includes a vertical extension 155 which extends upwardly beyond the tops of front side wall 136 and left and right side walls 140 and 142. Extension 155 thus adds additional height to help prevent mulch or particulate material being loaded into the interior chamber of hopper 82 from being thrown onto engine 22 and other components rearward of extension 155.

A rectangular exit opening 156 is formed in right side wall 142 to allow mulch or other particulate material to exit there through from within interior chamber 144. A flat vertical rectangular gate 158 is movably mounted on right side wall 142 in order to alter the size of exit opening 156 as desired. More particularly, side wall 142 includes a pair of vertical channels 160 which face one another and bound exit opening 156 so that the front and rear edges of gate 158 are slidably received within the front and rear channels 160 respectively such that gate 158 is manually vertically slidable up and down as indicated at Arrow F in FIG. 1. Channels 160, the bottom of gate 158 and the top of the conveyor belt of assembly 84 thus define therebetween exit opening 156, the size of which is thus adjustable by moving gate 158 upwardly or downwardly. A plurality of height adjustment holes 162 are formed in gate 158 and are vertically aligned and vertically spaced from one another. A securing mechanism including a rod 164 (FIGS. 10, 14, 16) is removably insertable into a selected one of holes 162 to secure gate 158 at the desired height. Rod 164 may be a threaded rod which threadably engages holes 162 if they are internally threaded or may for instance be a spring biased rod which is biased to be inserted into holes 162.

With primary reference to FIG. 2, a front entrance opening 166 is formed in upper segment 148 of front side wall 136 and extends downwardly from a horizontal top 168 of side wall 136. Entrance opening 166 has a horizontal top 170 at the same height as top 168, a horizontal bottom 172, a left side 174 adjacent left side wall 140 and a right side 176 intermediate left and right side walls 140 and 142. A substantially flat door 178 is movably mounted on upper segment of hopper 82 and has a shape which is approximately the same as that of entrance opening 166. Door 178 has a horizontal top 180, a horizontal bottom 182, a left side 184 and a right side 186. Door 178 is mounted adjacent bottom 182 by a hinge 188 whereby door 178 is pivotally movable about a horizontal axially extending axis X2 between a closed position shown in FIG. 2 and an open position shown in dashed lines in FIG. 1. In the closed position, top 180 is substantially coincident with top 170, bottom 182 is substantially coincident with bottom 172, left side 184 is substantially coincident with left side 174 and right side 186 is substantially coincident with right side 176 whereby door 178 in the closed position entirely covers entrance opening 166. Top 168 of front side wall 136, top 170 of entrance opening 166 and top 180 of door 178 when door 178 is closed are all at a height H1. Bottom 172 of entrance opening 166 is at a height H2 which is lower than height H1 so that when door 178 is pivoted to flip to its open position (FIG. 1), door 178 hangs downwardly from hinge 188 so that bottom 182 of the door serves as the top of the door in the open position while top 180 serves as the bottom of the door. It is noted that entrance opening 166 opens upwardly at top 170 when door 178 is in the opened position whereby assembly 2 is free of structure extending along the top of opening 166 from its left side to its right side when door 178 is open. Thus, when door 178 is opened, entrance opening 166 provides access to the interior chamber at a height which is lower than height H1, thereby facilitating the loading of mulch or other

particulate material into the hopper through entrance opening or doorway 166. When door 178 is closed, filling the hopper from the front must be achieved by moving the particulate material over top 168 or top 180 and thus above height H1 in order to enter interior chamber 144.

A securing mechanism is provided to secure door 178 in the closed position and includes a first latch 190 and second latch 192 (FIG. 10). First latch 190 is a channel-shaped member which receives a portion of door 178 along top 180 thereof. First latch 190 is pivotally mounted at pivot 194 on front side wall 136 adjacent top 168 and top 170 and side 176 of entrance opening 166. Second latch 192 is movably mounted on the inside of door 178 adjacent the left side 184 such that latch 192 is removably insertable into a hole (not shown) formed in left side wall 140 adjacent the top and front thereof. A coil spring 196 (FIG. 10) biases latch 192 to the secured position. The configuration of the securing mechanism provided by latch 192 is the same as or similar to rear mounting mechanism 86.

Hopper 82 includes a conveyor assembly housing 198 which is secured to the lower portions of side walls 136, 138, 140 and 142 and extends downwardly therefrom. Referring primarily to FIG. 14, housing 198 in the exemplary embodiment is formed from the single sheet of metal which is then bent to provide a bottom wall 200, a front side wall 202 which is secured to and extends upwardly from the front of bottom wall 200, and a back side wall 204 which is secured to and extends upwardly from the rear end of bottom wall 200. Walls 200, 202 and 204 define there within an interior chamber 206 which opens upwardly to communicate with interior chamber 144 whereby chambers 144 and 206 form a single chamber.

Front side wall 202 includes a lower vertical segment 208 which is secured to the front end of bottom wall 200 and extends upwardly therefrom, and an angled upper segment 210 which is secured to the top of segment 208 and angles upwardly and forward therefrom parallel to angled segment 150 to an upper terminal end. Back side wall 204 also includes a lower vertical segment 212 secured to the back end of bottom wall 200 extending upwardly therefrom, and an angled upper segment 214 which angles upwardly and rearwardly parallel to angled segment 154 to an upper terminal end. Angled segment 210 adjacent its upper terminal end is secured to a spacer 216 which is secured to angled segment 150 in a position spaced upwardly of its lower terminal end so that angled segments 210 and 150 are spaced from one another to define therebetween a front channel 218. Similarly, angled segment 214 adjacent its upper terminal end is secured to another spacer 216 which is secured to angle segment 154 whereby angled segments 214 and 154 are spaced from one another to define there within a rear channel 220. Channels 218 and 220 will be discussed further below. Housing 198 is thus rigidly secured to front and back side walls 136 and 138 by spacers 216, which are typically welded to the angled segments or otherwise rigidly secured thereto and extend from left side wall 140 to right side wall 142. Angled segments 210 and 214 are also rigidly secured at their left ends to left side wall 140 and that their right ends to right side wall 142. Housing 198 thus extends from adjacent left side wall 140 to adjacent right side wall 142 whereby channels 218 and 220 likewise extend from adjacent side wall 140 to adjacent side wall 142.

Bottom wall 200 includes a recessed wall 222 which is spaced upwardly from the bottom of the housing with a front foot 224 extending downwardly from the front of wall 222 and a back foot 226 extending downwardly from the back of wall 222. Front foot 224 is secured to the bottom of vertical segment 208 while back foot 226 is secured to the bottom of

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segment 212. Feet 224 and 226 define the bottom of housing 198 and the bottom of hopper 82, which is seated on the top upwardly facing surfaces of rails 28. Several longitudinal parallel strengthening ribs 230 are disposed within recess 228 and axially spaced from one another, as best seen in FIG. 11. Each rib 230 typically has a tubular form and is rigidly secured to recessed wall 222 and feet 224 and 226. In the exemplary embodiment, when assembly 2 is mounted on frame 16, all or nearly all of hopper 82 is positioned directly above lower deck mounting space 66 (or mower deck 4 if also mounted on frame 16), including the various side walls of hopper 82, gate 158, door 178 and housing 198.

Conveyor assembly 84 is now described in greater detail with primary reference to FIG. 16. Assembly 84 includes a conveyor belt support assembly which includes a first section 232 and a second or extension section 234. A flexible conveyor belt 236 is revolvably mounted on the conveyor assembly around sections 232 and 234. Section 232 includes a plurality of rigid parallel longitudinal support ribs 238 which are axially spaced from one another within interior chamber 206 of housing 198. Ribs 238 extend between and are rigidly secured to the upper portion of vertical segments 208 and 212 of housing 198. Ribs 238 thus substantially strengthen housing 198 and provide support for belt 236. First section 232 further includes a rotatable idler roller 240 spaced to the left of ribs 238. Roller 240 is disposed in chamber 206 and is rotatably mounted on a roller carriage 242 having front and rear plates which are slidably received within carriage openings 244 formed respectively in vertical segment 208 of front wall 202 (FIG. 2) and vertical segment 212 of back side wall 204 adjacent left side wall 140 (FIGS. 9, 16). More particularly, carriage 242 is horizontally slidable back and forth to the right and to the left as indicated at Arrow H in FIGS. 2 and 9. Front and rear springs 246 are provided respectively along openings 244 with their outer ends engaging the front and rear portions of carriage 242 respectively and their inner ends engaging housing 198 of hopper 82 or another fixed structure such as one of ribs 238 of first section 232. Springs 246 thus bias carriage 242 and roller 240 axially in a direction away from the opposite end of the conveyor belt support structure and opposite end of the conveyor belt. In this case, springs 246 bias carriage 242 and roller 240 to the left away from ribs 238.

First section 232 further includes axially elongated front and rear conveyor belt support planks 248 which are seated atop ribs 238 and on which conveyor belt 236 is supported. Planks 248 are typically formed of a plastic material which reduces friction between conveyor belt 236 and planks 248 during the sliding engagement therebetween when belt 236 is revolved. Each flat horizontal plank 248 has a left end which is adjacent carriage 242 and roller 240 and extends therefrom to an opposed right end which is adjacent and outward to the right of right side wall 142 of hopper 82. Thus, the right portion of each plank 48 extends outwardly beyond interior chambers 144 and 206. Planks 248 are longitudinally spaced from one another a short distance to define therebetween an axially elongated straight slot 250 extending from the left end to the right end of planks 248.

The second or extension section 234 is now described in greater detail with continued reference to FIG. 16 and additional reference to FIGS. 2 and 9-12. Section 234 includes front and back parallel axial beams 252 and 254, and several longitudinal support ribs 256 which are axially spaced from one another. Ribs 256 extend between and are rigidly secured to beams 252 and 254, thereby providing a rigid structure which is pivotally mounted on first section 232 to pivot about a longitudinal horizontal axis X3 (FIG. 10) passing through a

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pivot 258. Pivot 258 and axis X3 are thus adjacent and to the right of side wall 142 external to interior chambers 144 and 206. Pivot 258 is also adjacent the right end of first section 232 opposite the end from which roller 240 is mounted, and adjacent the inner or left end of second section 234 opposite the outer end thereof adjacent which another roller 260 is rotatably mounted on beams 252 and 254. Rollers 240 and 260 rotate about respective horizontal parallel longitudinally extending axes parallel to axis X3 (FIG. 10). Pivot 258 is mounted on pivot mounts 259 (FIG. 11) which are secured to and extend outwardly from vertical segments 208 and 212 of housing 198.

Second section 234 further includes a pair of flat horizontal axially elongated support planks 262 which are typically formed of the same material as and arranged in the same manner as planks 248 of first section 232 such that planks 262 are seated atop support ribs 256 and have top surfaces which the bottom of the conveyor belt slidably engages during operation. The front and rear support planks 262 are aligned with the front and rear planks 248 as viewed from the right or left side whereby the straight front planks 248 and 262 together form a flat horizontal axially elongated straight support extending from adjacent driven roller 240 to adjacent drive roller 260. Similarly, the straight rear planks 248 and 262 form a flat horizontal axially elongated straight support from adjacent lower 240 to adjacent lower 260. Support planks 262 are longitudinally spaced from one another a short distance in the same manner as planks 248 to define therebetween a straight axially elongated slot 264 (FIG. 14) which is aligned with slot 250 whereby slots 250 and 264 form a single straight slot extending in the axial direction from adjacent roller 240 to adjacent roller 260. As best seen in FIG. 18, each plank 262 has an inner beveled end 266 and each plank 248 has an outer beveled end 268 disposed outwardly of interior chambers 144 and 206 external to and to the right of right side wall 142. In the extended operational position of extension section 234 and conveyor assembly 84 shown in FIGS. 16 and 18, beveled edges 266 and 268 are positioned adjacent and outwardly beyond pivot 258. In this position, beveled ends 266 and 268 abut one another and have a mating configuration. In this position, beveled edges 266 and 268 angle axially outwardly and downwardly away from the hopper from their respective top surfaces to their respective bottom surfaces.

Conveyor belt 236 is now described in greater detail with primary reference to FIGS. 14 and 16. Belt 236 includes a flat sheet 270 which is the primary component of the belt and which has front and back parallel edges 272 and 274 extending in the axial direction from adjacent roller 240 to roller 260. Sheet 270 has an outer surface 276 and an inner surface 278. The upper portion of sheet 270 which extends from the top of roller 240 to the top of roller 260 is substantially flat such that outer surface 276 thereof serves as its top surface which is substantially horizontal and faces upwardly in the extended position of the conveyor assembly. The inner surface 278 of this upper portion of belt 236 serves as its bottom downwardly facing surface which is seated atop planks 248 and 262 and slidably engages the same during the revolving movement of the belt. The lower portion of sheet 270 which extends from the bottom of roller 240 to the bottom of roller 260 is also substantially horizontal whereby the inner surface 278 thereof serves its top upwardly facing surface and the outer surface 276 thereof serves as its bottom downwardly facing surface. Belt 236 further includes longitudinally elongated blades 280 which are secured to outer surface 276 and extend outwardly therefrom whereby blades 280 extend upwardly from the upper section of sheet 270 and downwardly from the lower section of sheet 270. Blades 280 do not

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extend all the way across sheet 270, but rather have opposed ends which are adjacent and spaced longitudinally inwardly respectively from front and back edges 272 and 274. The upper terminal edges of blades 80 are substantially horizontal.

Belt 236 further includes a tongue 282 which is secured to inner surface 278 and extends outwardly therefrom in the direction opposite blades 280 midway between front and back edges 272 to 274. Tongue 282 extends axially all the way around the belt and is configured for a mating engagement within a groove 284 formed in each of rollers 240 and 260. Groove 284 thus divides each of rollers 240 and 260 into first and second cylindrical segments 286 and 288 having the same diameter with groove 284 therebetween. The use of tongue 282 within grooves 284 of the rollers thus eliminates or substantially minimizes the longitudinal movement of conveyor belt 236 during its revolving movement. It is noted that the conveyor belt may be formed with a groove while the rollers are formed with a tongue which is inserted in the groove of the belt to provide a similar effect. Inner surface 278 of sheet 270 engages the cylindrical outer surfaces of segments 286 and 288 of each roller 240 and 260. The outer surfaces of segments 286 and 288 of roller 260 are typically knurled or otherwise roughened to increase the frictional engagement with the inner surface 278 inasmuch as roller 260 is the drive roller of the assembly, whereas roller 240 is a driven roller driven by belt 236. A hydraulic motor 290 is secured to rear axial beam 254 adjacent its outer end and has a rotatable drive shaft 292 rotationally connected to drive roller 260 in order to drive rotation of roller 260. Motor 290 is thus carried by section 234 and is part of a hydraulic system described in greater detail further below.

With primary reference now to FIGS. 2 and 10, front and rear chute walls 294 are mounted on and extend between side wall 142 and respective axial beams 252 and 254 of extension section 234. More particularly, chute walls 294 are, in the extended position of extension 234, substantially flat, vertical and lie substantially within respective vertical parallel planes which extend in the axial direction. In the extended position, chute walls 294 are thus parallel and respectively forward and rearward of and adjacent exit opening 156. Chute walls 294 have bottom edges 296 which are respectively secured to beams 252 and 254 by respective mounting brackets 298. Chute walls 294 also have respective inner edges 300 which are secured to side wall 142 by respective mounting brackets 302. Each chute wall 294 has an angled upper edge 304 which angles axially outwardly and downwardly from the inner end to the outer end of chute wall 294 and thus from adjacent side wall 142 and the top of bracket 302 to adjacent the outer end of the respective beam 252 or 254 and the outer end of the respective mounting bracket 298. Chute walls 294 are triangular as viewed in the longitudinal direction in the extended position. The upper section of conveyor belt 236 of extension 234 and chute walls 294 together form a chute 306 which extends axially outwardly away from side wall 142 and exit opening 156 whereby chute 306 is configured for carrying mulch or other particulate material axially outwardly away from exit opening 156 and interior chamber 144. Each chute wall 294 in the exemplary embodiment is formed of a flexible material, typically rubber or another elastomer.

Referring now to FIGS. 10 and 16, a flexible flap 308 is provided within interior chamber 144 adjacent its left end and thus opposite from exit opening 156. Flap 308 has an upper edge 310 which is secured to left side wall 140 such that flap 308 hangs downwardly therefrom to a terminal lower edge 312 which is seated atop conveyor belt 236 adjacent and above roller 240. As shown in FIG. 10, flap 308 has front and

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rear edges 314 and 316 which respectively angle upwardly and outwardly from lower edge 312 to upper edge 310 and are respectively closely adjacent or abut angle segments 150 and 154 of hopper 82. Flap 308 is typically formed of a rubber or other elastomer. Flap 308 adjacent lower end 312 slidably engages conveyor belt 236 during operation.

Referring now to FIGS. 10 and 14-16, front and rear axially elongated sealing strips 318 and 320 are respectively disposed within front and rear channels 218 and 220. Strips 318 and 320 are typically substantially rigid and formed of a plastic material which is similar to or the same as that of planks 248 and 262. In one embodiment, this material is high density polyethylene (HDPE) although other suitable plastic or other materials may be used. Each of the sealing strips has a left end 322 adjacent left side wall 140 and adjacent the left ends of the respective channels 218 and 220. The strips also have respective right ends 324 adjacent right side wall 142 and the right ends of the respective channels 218 and 220. Each strip 318 and 320 has top and bottom edges 326 and 328 which are substantially horizontal as viewed in the longitudinal direction and extend from left end 322 to right end 324. Each of the strips has an inner surface 330 and an outer surface 332. Inner surfaces 330 face upwardly and bound interior chamber 144 while outer surfaces 332 face generally downwardly away from interior chamber 144. Each of strips 318 and 320 is substantially flat and positioned at an angle whereby inner and outer surfaces 330 and 332 are angled relative to horizontal.

As viewed in the axial direction and as best shown in FIG. 15, rear strip 320 is angled upwardly and rearwardly whereby parallel inner and outer surfaces 330 and 332 likewise angle upwardly and rearwardly whereby surface 330 faces upwardly and forward and surface 332 faces downwardly and rearward. Rear strip 320 is slidably mounted within channel 220 generally upwardly and downwardly (Arrow J) at an angle parallel to surfaces 330, 332 and to angled segments 154 and 214. Surface 330 thus slidably engages segment 154 and surface 332 slidably engages segment 214 during the sliding movement of strip 320. Typically, strip 320 is angled upwardly at about a 45-degree angle and bottom edge 328 is also beveled at about a 45-degree angle such that bottom edge 328 is substantially horizontal and seated atop the upper surface 276 of sheet 270 of belt 236 whereby there is a sliding engagement between bottom edge 328 and surface 276 adjacent back edge 274 during revolving movement of belt 236. Springs 334 such as coil springs may be positioned within channel 220 with an upper end of the spring engaging the lower edge of spacer 26 and the lower end of the spring engaging the top edge 326 of member 320, thereby biasing strip 320 downwardly toward and against belt 236. Otherwise, strips move downwardly along their respective angles under force of gravity.

Front sealing strip 318 is substantially a mirror image of rear strip 320 and operates in the same manner although strip 318 is angled in the opposite direction from strip 320. Thus, inner and outer surfaces 330 and 332 of strip 318 angle upwardly and forward so that surface 330 faces upwardly and rearward and bounds chamber 144 while surface 332 thereof faces downwardly and forward away from chamber 144. Surfaces 330 and 332 of front seal 318 respectively slidably engage angled segments 150 and 210. Beveled bottom edge 328 of front strip 318 slidably engages surface 276 of belt 236 adjacent front edge 272. Sealing strips 318 and 320 thus provide a sealing engagement with surface 276 of conveyor belt 236. This sealing engagement thus substantially eliminates or minimizes the degree of leakage of particles from particulate material within the interior chamber of hopper 82

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from moving from within the hopper between belts **236** and strips **318** and **320** such that such debris or particles would move outwardly beyond the edges **272** and **274** of conveyor belt **236**, thereby preventing or minimizing such debris or particles from entering chamber **206** of housing **198** and contacting the various components below the upper horizontal section of conveyor belt **236**, such as planks **248** and **262** pivot **258**, rollers **240** and **260** and the corresponding axles and bearings associated therewith.

Referring primarily to FIG. 2, a linear actuator **336** is provided for moving the extension portion of conveyor belt assembly **84** between an extended position shown in FIG. 2 and a retracted position shown in FIG. 21. In the exemplary embodiment, actuator **336** is a piston-cylinder combination wherein the cylinder is pivotally mounted at a pivot **338** on hopper **82** via a mounting bracket secured to the hopper. The piston of actuator **336** is pivotally mounted at pivot **340** to the extension section of assembly **84** via a mounting bracket secured to axial beam **252**. An electric motor **342** is mounted on the cylinder for powering the actuation of actuator **336**, more particularly to extend and retract the piston thereof to facilitate pivotal movement of the extension of assembly **84**. Electric motor **342** is in electrical communication with switch **72** and a battery of engine **22**, which provides electric power for operation of motor **342**.

With primary reference to FIGS. 9, 9A and 13, the hydraulic system of attachment **2** is now described. As previously noted, the hydraulic system includes the hydraulic motor **290**. The hydraulic system is self-contained and in the exemplary embodiment is mounted entirely on attachment **2** whereby the hydraulic system is removable from the frame **16** with attachment **2**. The hydraulic system also includes a hydraulic pump **344** (FIG. 13) which is mounted below the bottom of housing **198** of hopper **82**. The hydraulic system further includes a hydraulic tank or reservoir **346** rigidly mounted on housing **198** of hopper **82**. Reservoir **346** defines an interior chamber **347** for containing hydraulic fluid **349** which is pumped throughout the system. Pump **344** has a pump outlet **348** and a pump inlet **350**. Hydraulic motor **290** has a motor outlet **352** and a motor inlet **354**. A hydraulic feed line **356** is connected at its upstream end to pump outlet **348** and at its downstream end to motor inlet **354**. A return line **358** is connected at its upstream end to motor outlet **352** and at its downstream end to pump inlet **350**. Feed line **356** includes a first or upstream segment **360** and a second or downstream segment **362**. Return line **358** includes a first or upstream segment **364** and a second or downstream segment **366**. The hydraulic system further includes a 1-connector **368**, a relief valve **370**, a conduit **372** and an exchange connector **374**. Exchange connector **374** includes a convergence chamber wall **376** which defines a convergence chamber **378**, an exchange leg **380** which defines an exchange passage **382**, an input leg **384** which defines an input passage **386** and an output leg **388** which defines an output passage **390**. First segment **360** at its upstream end is connected to outlet **348** and at its downstream end to an inlet of T-connector **368**. Downstream segment **362** is connected at its upstream end to an outlet of 1-connector **368** and at its downstream end to motor inlet **354**. First segment **364** at its upstream end is connected to motor outlet **352** and at its downstream end to input leg **384** of connector **374**. Second segment **366** at its upstream end is connected to output leg **388** of connector **374** and at its downstream end to inlet **350** of pump **344**. In the exemplary embodiment, segments **360**, **362**, **364** and **366** are flexible hoses while T-connector **368** and exchange connector **374** are typically rigid structures which are usually formed of metal. T-connector **368** includes an outlet which is connected to and in fluid

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communication with relief valve **370**. Conduit **372** extends between and is connected to relief valve **370** and hydraulic tank **346** to provide fluid communication therebetween. Relief valve **370** is configured to release hydraulic fluid in the case of an overpressure situation within the hydraulic system whereby hydraulic fluid typically does not flow between connector **368** and reservoir **346** via valve **370** under normal operating circumstances.

In typical hydraulic systems, the reservoir has an inlet and a separate outlet such that under normal operations, hydraulic fluid is pumped into the reservoir via the inlet and out of the reservoir via the outlet. The hydraulic system of the present invention is configured to avoid this type of configuration and operation, and substantially minimizes the amount of hydraulic fluid needed within the system. To that effect, the present hydraulic system includes exchange connector **374**. Connector **374** is positioned adjacent and below reservoir **346** such that exchange leg **380** is connected to and extends between chamber wall **376** and the bottom wall of reservoir **346** whereby exchange passage **382** provides fluid communication between convergence chamber **378** and interior chamber **347** of tank **346**. Input leg **384** is connected to and extends upstream from chamber wall **376** such that input passage **386** is in fluid communication with and extends upstream from convergence chamber **378**. Output leg **388** is connected to and extends downstream from chamber wall **376** such that output passage **390** is in fluid communication with and extends in the downstream direction from convergence chamber **378**. In the exemplary embodiment, each of legs **384** and **388** extends perpendicular to exchange leg **380** whereby each of passages **386** and **390** also extend perpendicular to exchange passage **382**. Input and output legs **384** and **388** define therebetween an obtuse fluid exchange angle K (FIG. 13) such that hydraulic fluid which enters the input leg from segment **364** is exchanged with hydraulic fluid in interior chamber **347** of the reservoir **346** via exchange passage **382**. Angle K typically falls within the range of about 165 to 175 degrees, usually within the range of about 168 to 173 degrees, and in the exemplary embodiment is in the range of about 170 to 171 degrees.

As illustrated in FIGS. 9 and 13, the feed flow direction of the hydraulic fluid flow in the hydraulic feed lines from pump **344** to motor **290** is shown at Arrows FF whereas the return flow direction of hydraulic fluid flow in the return lines is illustrated at Arrows FR. FIG. 13 also shows at Arrow FD1 the fluid flow direction of hydraulic fluid within input passage **386** and immediately upstream thereof, and at Arrow FD2 the fluid flow direction of hydraulic fluid within output passage **390** and immediately downstream thereof. Fluid direction FD1 and FD2 also define therebetween obtuse angle K. It has been shown that the fluid flow associated with the fluid exchange angle K causes fluid exchange between chamber **347** of reservoir **346** and convergence chamber **378**. More particularly, FIG. 9A illustrates such an exchange at Arrows FE1 and FE2, wherein Arrow FE1 indicates fluid flowing from chamber **378** into chamber **347** and Arrow FE2 illustrates fluid flowing from chamber **347** into chamber **378**. Although this fluid exchange occurs, the predominant flow of hydraulic fluid nonetheless is directly through input passage **384**, chamber **376** and output passage **390**. Although the fluid dynamics have not been specifically investigated, it may be that the fluid flow due to angle K creates a vortex leading to the above-noted fluid exchange.

Referring now to FIGS. 9 and 9B, reservoir **346** is described in greater detail. Reservoir **346**, all of which is directly above space **66** when assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**, includes a top wall **392**, a bottom wall **394**, a left

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end wall **396**, a right end wall **398**, a front wall **400** and a back wall **402**. A fill tube **404** is mounted on the reservoir adjacent top wall **392** with a closure cap **406** provided which may be removed in order to fill the tank with hydraulic fluid and secured thereon in order to provide a seal between the interior chamber and external atmosphere in order to provide a closed hydraulic system. Each of the above-noted walls of reservoir **346** is typically substantially flat and made of metal. Preferably, the metal of which the walls are formed is aluminum or an alloy formed primarily of aluminum. As shown in FIG. 9B, front wall **400** abuts vertical segment **212** of back side wall **204** of housing **198**. Preferably, the outer or front surface of wall **400** is in substantially continuous contact from top to bottom and from the left end to the right end with the outer or rear surface of vertical segment **212** in order to provide the greatest degree of contact between wall **400** of reservoir and segment **212** of hopper **82**. Wall **400** and segment **212** are thereby in thermal communication with one another in order to provide substantial thermal exchange therebetween. Thus, when hydraulic fluid **349** is heated during its work when pumped through the hydraulic system by pump **344** through motor **290**, hopper **82** serves as a heat sink such that heat from hydraulic fluid is transmitted through wall **400** to segment **212** so that this heat may be dissipated relatively rapidly through the various walls of hopper **82**. Hopper **82** serves as a good heat sink in that wall **400** of reservoir **346** and the various walls of hopper **82** are formed of good thermal conductors. More particularly, like the walls of reservoir **346**, the various walls of hopper **82** are formed of metal and preferably of aluminum or an aluminum alloy which is primarily aluminum. These thermally conductive metal walls of hopper **82** include front and back side walls **136** and **138**, left and right side walls **140** and **142**, bottom wall **200** and front and back side walls **202** and **204** of housing **198**, and spacers **216**.

With primary reference to FIG. 13, hydraulic pump **344** includes a rotatable drive shaft **408** upon which a sheave **410** (FIGS. 11-12) is securely mounted to rotate with shaft **408**. In the exemplary embodiment, sheave **410** is configured for use with sheave **44** (FIG. 1) and belt **46** such that engine **22** powers the rotation of drive sheave **44** to cause rotation of sheave **410** and shaft **408** via belt **46**, thereby causing pump **344** to pump the hydraulic fluid through the hydraulic system. Pump **344** is secured to a pump mounting bracket **412** which is pivotally mounted to pivot about a vertical axis passing through a pivot **414** which is mounted on housing **198** via a pivot mounting bracket **416** secured to vertical segment **208** of front side wall **202**. A lever **418** is secured to bracket **412** adjacent pivot **414** and extends away from pivot **414** in a direction opposite that of bracket **412**. A spring **420** is mounted on pump **344** via a first connector **422** at one end of the spring and on the hopper via a second connector **424** to which the other end of the spring is connected. More particularly, first connector **422** is mounted on the pump housing and second connector **424** is secured to one of ribs **230**.

Pivot **424** is offset from drive shaft **408** (which rotates about a vertical axis) whereby pump **344**, shaft **408**, sheave **410**, bracket **412** and lever **418** are pivotable about the vertical axis of pivot **414** between an engaged position (FIGS. 1 and 11) in which belt **46** engages and wraps around sheave **410** and sheave **44** and a disengaged position in which belt **46** is disengaged from sheave **410** to facilitate the mounting and dismounting of belt **46** from sheave **410**. To facilitate the mounting and dismounting of belt **46**, the user may apply a force as shown at Arrow L in FIG. 12 to lever **418** to pivot the pump assembly about pivot **414** (Arrow M) from the engaged position to the disengaged position. Spring **420** biases the pump assembly to the engaged position of FIG. 11, whereby

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the force on the handle or lever **418** must overcome the spring bias of spring **420** to move the assembly from the engaged position to the disengaged position. Because the pump itself is pivotally mounted about pivot **414**, flexible hoses forming segments **360** and **366** of the hydraulic lines flex during the movement between the engaged and disengaged positions as illustrated in FIGS. 11 and 12.

When assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**, a majority of the conveyor belt support assembly and conveyor belt **236** are positioned directly above mower deck mounting space **66** including all of section **232** and the inner portion of section **234**, as well as pivot **258**. Thus, all of ribs **238** and planks **248** are entirely directly above space **66**, as are sealing strips **318** and **320**. During the mounting of assembly **2** on frame **16**, assembly **2** is lowered into position atop frame **16** such that sheave **410** moves downwardly through space **32** via the top and bottom entrance openings **34** and **36** thereof (FIG. 3) from a position above rails **28** and space **32** shown in FIGS. 3 and 6 to the mounted position shown in FIGS. 1 and 2 whereby in the exemplary embodiment, sheave **410** is adjacent or within the same space occupied by sheave **48** when deck **4** is mounted on frame **16**. When assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**, sheave **410** is thus adjacent or within space **66** while the other components of the hydraulic pump assembly are within or adjacent and directly above space **66**, including bracket **412**, pivot **414** and lever **418**. Portions of the hydraulic pump assembly may also be within space **32** when assembly **2** is mounted on frame **16**. During the dismounting or detaching of assembly **2** from frame **16**, sheave **410** and the various components of the hydraulic pump assembly just described move upwardly from their mounted positions from adjacent space **66** upwardly through space **32** via entrance openings **34** and **36** to a position upwardly of rails **28** and space **32**.

The operation of assembly **2** is now described with primary reference to FIGS. 19-22. As noted previously, assembly **2** may be operated while unit **1** is moving or when its travel is stopped. After the operator has turned on engine **22**, he or she may push button **70** (Arrow N in FIG. 19) to initiate the operation of hydraulic pump **344**, which is driven by the rotation of shaft **408** and sheave **410**, and thus is powered by engine **22** via sheave **44** (FIG. 1), belt **46** and sheave **410**. More particularly, the manipulation of button **70** is used to cause a clutch (not shown) of engine **22** to engage in order to drive rotation of shaft **408** in sheave **410**. The operation of pump **344** thus pumps hydraulic fluid through the feed line to hydraulic motor **290** to drive rotation of roller **260** (Arrow O in FIG. 20) and thereby drive the revolving movement of conveyor belt **236**. The horizontal axial movement of the bottom section of conveyor belt **236** is shown at Arrow P in FIG. 20. Arrows Q in FIG. 20 illustrate the horizontal axial movement of the top section of the conveyor belt as well as the horizontal axial movement of mulch or other particulate material **426** along the top section of the conveyor belt to discharge material **426** from within chamber **144** through exit opening **156** onto the extension section of the conveyor assembly within chute **306**, and Arrows R illustrate material **426** being discharged or thrown outwardly from the end of the extension of the conveyor assembly so that the particulate material **426** falls to the ground. Conveyor belt **36** is thus operated when the conveyor assembly is in the extended operational position of FIG. 20, during which time sections **232** and **234** are fixed relative to frame **16**.

As shown in FIG. 19, clutch **74** may be moved back and forth (Arrow S) to increase or decrease the speed or RPMs of engine **22** and the corresponding speed of rotation of shaft **42**, sheave **44** (FIG. 1), sheave **410** and shaft **408**, whereby pump

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344 pumps fluid at a slower or faster rate to consequently decrease or increase the rotation of roller **260** and the revolving speed of conveyor belt **236**. Throttle **74** may be operated to decrease the revolving speed of conveyor belt **236** to the degree that particulate material **426** essentially falls straight downwardly from adjacent the end of the extension of the conveyor assembly and may likewise be increased to throw or shoot particulate material **426** outwardly beyond the end of the chute up to, for instance, a distance of about three to three and a half feet in the exemplary embodiment. Throttle **74** may thus also be positioned to throw material **426** to any desired distance within this range. Thus, while the conveyor assembly is in the extended position shown in FIG. **20**, unit **1** may be driven or operated to travel as desired (primarily forward) while simultaneously throwing the particulate material **426** in desired locations. This is particularly useful for throwing mulch onto garden beds and the like. Gate **158** may be manually moved upwardly or downwardly and secured in position as desired to set the desired size of entrance opening **156** suited to a given scenario.

In the exemplary embodiment, the top portion of conveyor belt **236** moves in a single horizontal axial direction (Arrows P) so that material **426** likewise moves in this single direction along the top of the conveyor belt, thereby allowing better control of the material **426** as opposed to a broadcast spreader or other spreading devices which are configured for a wide-spread distribution. Material **426** is thus thrown directly off the end of conveyor **236** adjacent roller **260**, the outer end of chute **306** and the outer end of section **234** whereby material moves directly from the conveyor belt through the air and onto the ground without additional manipulation by additional components after exiting the conveyor belt. Although the Figures illustrate that hopper **82** is formed with the exit opening **156** on the right side and the extension **234** extending outwardly to the right in order to discharge material **426** to the right, hopper **82** may easily be configured in the opposite manner such that material **426** is thrown to the left side. Thus, the conveyor assembly is configured to discharge material **426** in a direction which is substantially perpendicular to the direction of forward travel of unit **1**. In either case, assembly **2** is configured to discharge material **426** from within hopper **82** with only a single conveyor belt **236**, thus providing a simple and low cost configuration.

When the user no longer desires to discharge particulate material **426** from within hopper **82**, the extension section of conveyor assembly **84** may be moved from the substantially horizontal extended operational position shown in FIG. **20** to the retracted stored position shown in FIG. **21**. To achieve this, the operator may flip switch **72** (Arrow T in FIG. **19**) from the neutral position shown in solid lines to one of the positions shown in dashed lines, thereby typically closing an electrical circuit to operate motor **342** to retract the piston of actuator **336** (Arrow U in FIG. **21**) and thereby retract the extension section of the assembly by pivotal movement (Arrow V) about pivot **258** and the horizontal axis thereof. The outer end of the extension of the conveyor assembly **84**, including roller **260** and motor **290**, thus pivot upwardly and inwardly toward hopper **82** from the extended position to the retracted position. The extension section pivots from the extended to the retracted position at least 45, 50 or 55 degrees, typically at least 60 or 65 degrees and usually within the range of about 60 to 90 degrees.

Chute walls **294** fold up to a folded position in response to this retracting movement of the extension of assembly **84**. As the extension of assembly **84** pivots upwardly toward the retracted position, conveyor belt **236** loosens around the support assembly whereby springs **246** expand and force carriage

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242 with roller **240** away from the opposite end of the assembly adjacent roller **260** and away from exit opening **256** and the opposite side of hopper **82** (Arrow W). To reverse this process, the operator may simply flip switch **72** into the other of the dashed line positions shown in FIG. **19** to operate motor **342** to extend the piston in a direction opposite Arrow U and thereby cause the extension section to pivot downwardly in the direction opposite Arrow V to move the extension from the retracted position of FIG. **21** to the extended position of FIG. **20**. Thus, chute walls **294** unfold and straighten into their unfolded substantially flat vertical positions in response to the movement of the extension section from the retracted position to the extended position. When the extension of conveyor assembly **84** is moved from the retracted stored position to the extended operational position, belt **236** tightens and presses against roller **240**, thereby moving roller **240** and carriage **242** against the spring bias of springs **246** such that springs **246** are compressed. Thus, springs **246** maintains conveyor belt **236** in a sufficiently tightened position in the extended position of the extension of conveyor assembly **84**. It is noted that in the retracted stored position of the conveyor assembly, conveyor belt **236** is not revolvable and thus is inoperable due to the slackness of belt **236**.

The retraction of the extension section thus provides a narrower axial profile of assembly **2** and of unit **1**. This is illustrated by the comparison of FIGS. **2** and **21**. More particularly, as shown in FIG. **2**, the left side **12** of assembly **2**, hopper **82** and unit **1** and the extended right side **14** defined by the outer end of the extension of assembly **84** define therebetween an axial horizontal width **W1** of assembly **2** and unit **1**. In the retracted position of FIG. **21**, left side **12** and a retracted left side **14A** defined by the outer end of the extension of assembly **84** define therebetween an axial horizontal width **W2** of assembly **2** and unit **1** which is substantially less than width **W1**. Width **W2** is typically within a range of about 60 or 65% to about 85% of **W1** and usually in a range of about 65 or 70% to about 75, 80, or 85%.

FIGS. **18** and **22** respectively illustrate the conveyor assembly adjacent pivot **258** in the extended position and the retracted position. As previously discussed, beveled ends **266** and **268** are closely adjacent or abut one another in the extended position. In addition, planks **248** and **262** are parallel with their top surfaces substantially coplanar and their bottom surfaces substantially coplanar. In the retracted position of FIG. **22**, end **266** is separated and spaced from end **268** such that end **266** is higher than and axially inwardly to the left of end **268** and thus higher than and to the left of its position in the extended position of FIG. **18**. In addition, planks **262** move from a substantially horizontal position in the extended position to an upwardly extending position which is closer to vertical than to horizontal in the retracted position such that the top and bottom surfaces of planks **262** are no longer coplanar with the top and bottom surfaces of planks **248** respectively, but rather angled upwardly and axially outwardly relative thereto. FIG. **18** also shows that the conveyor belt upper and lower sections are in their entirety substantially horizontal in the extended position whereas in the retracted position, the upper and lower segments of conveyor belt **236** within hopper **82** remain substantially horizontal and the corresponding sections of the extension portion extend upwardly while portions of the conveyor belt therebetween are curved adjacent pivot **258**.

In summary, the present invention provides a self-propelled unit including a functional assembly or attachment which may be permanently secured to the unit or removably attached. In the exemplary embodiment, the assembly comprises a hopper and conveyor assembly for respectively con-

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taining particulate material and discharging particulate material from within the hopper whereby the unit is configured for throwing mulch or other particulate material in a controlled manner as desired onto garden beds or elsewhere. The attachment of the present invention may be rapidly mounted on or detached from the frame of a self-propelled unit, no tools are required to effect this mounting or dismounting, and no warranty-voiding alteration is required to the original unit on which the attachment may be mounted as a retrofit attachment. Inasmuch as assembly 2 is configured to be mounted atop the frame of the self-propelled unit as opposed to being towed thereby, assembly 2 is in the exemplary embodiment free of ground engaging wheels or a hitch member for hitching to a hitch member of a self-propelled unit for towing. Although the unit may be configured to simultaneously carry mower deck 4 and assembly 2, mower deck 4 is typically removed from frame 16 when assembly 2 is mounted thereon to reduce the weight of the unit. Mower decks of the type shown in the Figures often weigh on the order of about 350 pounds. In the exemplary embodiment, assembly 2 has a weight of about 150 pounds.

In the foregoing description, certain terms have been used for brevity, clearness, and understanding. No unnecessary limitations are to be implied therefrom beyond the requirement of the prior art because such terms are used for descriptive purposes and are intended to be broadly construed.

Moreover, the description and illustration of the invention is an example and the invention is not limited to the exact details shown or described.

The invention claimed is:

1. An apparatus comprising:

- a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit having a front and back defining therebetween a longitudinal direction, left and right sides defining therebetween an axial direction, the unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine whereby the unit is capable of travel in a forward direction;
- an operator position at which an operator of the unit is positioned during forward travel of the unit;
- a hopper which is mounted on the frame forward of the operator position and which defines an interior chamber;
- a conveyor belt which is forward of the operator position and revolvably mounted for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber in the axial direction;
- an exit opening of the hopper through which the particulate material is dischargeable during operation of the conveyor belt;
- an extension section of the conveyor belt which extends from the exit opening away from the hopper;
- a conveyor belt support assembly on which the conveyor belt is revolvably mounted;
- a first section of the support assembly extending along the interior chamber of the hopper;
- a second section of the support assembly which supports the extension section of the conveyor belt and which is movable relative to the first section of the support assembly between an extended position and a retracted position;
- wherein in the extended position the apparatus has left and right sides defining therebetween a first horizontal width; and
- in the retracted position the apparatus has left and right sides defining therebetween a second horizontal width which is less than the first horizontal width.

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- 2.** The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising a pair of spaced chute walls extending upwardly along the extension section so that the extension section and chute walls together form a chute extending from adjacent the exit opening outwardly away from the hopper; wherein the chute walls are movable between an operational position and a stored position.

- 3.** The apparatus of claim 2 wherein the chute walls are foldable between the operational position and stored position.

- 4.** The apparatus of claim 3 wherein the chute walls are formed of a flexible material.

5. The apparatus of claim 1

- wherein the second section of the support assembly is pivotally movable relative to the first section of the support assembly.

6. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a pair of opposed sidewalls of the hopper;
- a channel formed in each of the sidewalls with a bottom entrance opening;
- a sealing strip received in each channel and movable upwardly and downwardly therein; and
- a bottom of each sealing strip which rests atop the conveyor belt.

7. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a sidewall of the hopper;
- a doorway formed in the sidewall having a bottom and a top which is at a first height;
- a door having a closed position which covers the doorway from the top thereof to the bottom thereof and an open position in which the doorway is uncovered from the top thereof to the bottom thereof whereby the doorway in the open position provides access to the interior chamber at a second height lower than the first height to facilitate loading of particulate material into the hopper through the doorway.

8. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- an attachment which is removably mounted on the frame and comprises the hopper and conveyor belt; and
- a self-contained hydraulic system of the attachment which comprises a hydraulic pump and a hydraulic motor which is driven by the pump and drives revolving movement of the conveyor belt.

9. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a hydraulic reservoir mounted on the hopper whereby the hopper serves as a heat sink for hydraulic fluid within the reservoir.

10. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a mower deck mounted on the frame.

11. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a mower deck mounting space in which a mower deck is positioned when mounted on the frame;
- wherein the conveyor belt extends directly above the mower deck mounting space.

12. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- a mower deck;
- a hole in the frame;
- a first mounting member which extends through the hole to mount the mower deck on the frame; and
- a second mounting member which extends through the hole when the first mounting member is removed from the hole to mount the hopper on the frame.

13. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising

- left and right longitudinal rails of the frame;
- wherein the hopper is seated atop the rails.

14. An apparatus comprising:

- a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit having a front and back defining therebetween a longitudinal direction, left and right sides defining therebetween an

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axial direction, the unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine whereby the unit is capable of travel in a forward direction;

an operator position at which an operator of the unit is positioned during forward travel of the unit;

a hopper which is mounted on the frame forward of the operator position and which defines an interior chamber;

a conveyor belt which is forward of the operator position and revolvably mounted for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber in the axial direction;

a hydraulic pump assembly comprising a hydraulic pump having a rotatable input shaft and a first sheave secured to the input shaft and rotatable therewith;

a second sheave rotatably driven by the engine;

a drive belt which is mountable on the first and second sheaves to drive rotation of the input shaft; and

a pivot about which the pump assembly is pivotable between an engaged position in which the drive belt is mounted on the first and second sheaves for driving rotation of the input shaft and a disengaged position in which the first sheave is disengaged from the drive belt to facilitate mounting and dismounting of the drive belt on the first sheave.

15. An apparatus comprising:

a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit having a front and back defining therebetween a longitudinal direction, left and right sides defining therebetween an axial direction, the unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine whereby the unit is capable of travel in a forward direction;

an operator position at which an operator of the unit is positioned during forward travel of the unit;

a hopper which is mounted on the frame forward of the operator position and which defines an interior chamber;

a conveyor belt which is forward of the operator position and revolvably mounted for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber in the axial direction;

a hydraulic reservoir of the apparatus;

an exchange connector comprising a convergence chamber wall defining a convergence chamber;

an exchange leg of the connector which is connected to and extends between the chamber wall and reservoir and

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defines an exchange passage providing fluid communication between the convergence chamber and reservoir;

an output leg of the connector which is connected to and extends downstream from the chamber wall and defines an output passage in fluid communication with and extending in a downstream direction from the convergence chamber;

an input leg of the connector which is connected to and extends upstream from the chamber wall and defines an input passage in fluid communication with and extending in an upstream direction from the convergence chamber; and

an obtuse fluid-exchange angle defined between the input leg and output leg;

wherein hydraulic fluid which enters the input leg is exchanged with hydraulic fluid in the reservoir via the exchange passage due to the fluid-exchange angle.

16. The apparatus of claim 15 wherein the fluid-exchange angle is in the range of about 165 to 175 degrees.

17. An apparatus comprising:

a self-propelled outdoor power equipment unit having a front and back defining therebetween a longitudinal direction, left and right sides defining therebetween an axial direction, the unit comprising a frame, an engine mounted on the frame, and drive wheels rotatably mounted on the frame and powered by the engine whereby the unit is capable of travel in a forward direction;

an operator position at which an operator of the unit is positioned during forward travel of the unit;

a hopper which is mounted on the frame forward of the operator position and which defines an interior chamber;

a conveyor belt which is forward of the operator position and revolvably mounted for discharging particulate material from the interior chamber in the axial direction;

a caster mount sleeve of the frame;

a pivot rotatably mounted within the sleeve;

a caster wheel bracket secured to and extending downwardly from the pivot;

a ground-engaging caster wheel rotatably mounted on the bracket; and

a hopper mount sleeve which receives therein the caster mount sleeve for mounting the hopper on the frame.

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